銃皇無尽のファフニール

ダークネス・ディザスター

XII

ツカサ
Illustration
梱枝りこ

講談社ラノベ文庫

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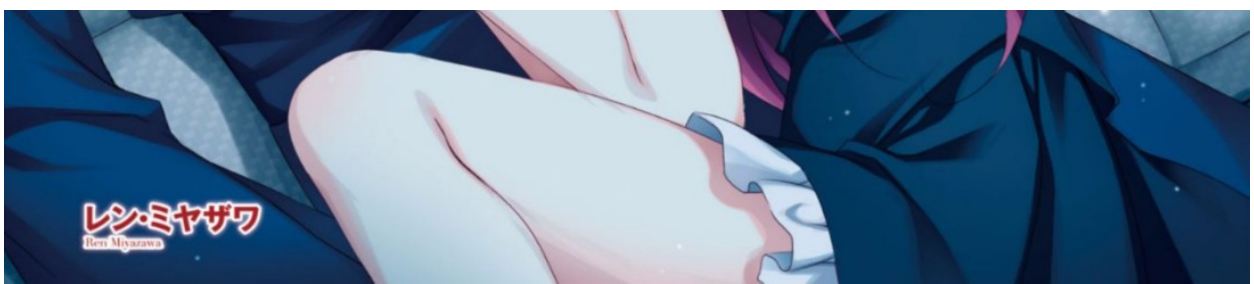

「じゃあ、いくぞ」
まずは頭頂部付近の髪に指を挿し込み、
シャンプーを泡立てながら
頭皮を柔らかく擦っていく。
「……ふふっ、ちょうとくすぐったいの」
ティア・ライトニング
Tear Lightning

「フィリル王女、失礼いたします」
彼女が王族として振る舞っているのなら、これが適当だろうと恭しく告げ、俺は彼女の手に唇で触れる。
物部悠
Yuu Monobe
フィリル・クレスト
Firill Crest

Prologue

Badump, badump, badump—
The "pulse" resounded across the world.
As though announcing its existence, the "pulse" persisted incessantly, the sound repeating at regular intervals.
This deep noise shook the atmosphere violently, changing the shapes of clouds, carving circular ripples onto the sea surface. Birds flew into the sky while fish and marine mammals fled in the water.
They ran away from the "pulse," trying to get as far away as possible.
They did not understand what they were fleeing, however, instinct told them to escape. This sound was the heart beat of a lifeform more powerful than everything else.
The pitch-black domes, each 300km in diameter, had appeared all over the world. No sensory equipment had been able to detect what was inside the unknown territory inside them—
At one location, a gigantic heart had appeared inside the dome and kept beating *badump*, *badump*.
The heart was surrounded by a sphere of blood vessels that pulsated along with the beating.
This was quite a surreal scene beyond comprehension.
Mankind, equipped with rationality and knowledge, was probably the most terrified by it.
They did not have the luxury of acting curious. They were plunged into panic, fleeing desperately like animals—
However, precisely because mankind possessed rationality and knowledge, some of them were able to control fear. Even when confronted with an overwhelming crisis, they could still take on the challenge.
Standing on the bridge of the *Naglfar*, a battleship cruising on the sea off the American west coast, this man—Loki Jotunheim—was one of such people.
"'Eternal Longevity' Bahamut... huh?"
Seeing the pitch-black dome and the sphere of blood vessels surrounding the heart displayed on the bridge monitor, Loki spoke quietly.
It was the name that had appeared on his terminal. This name was recorded in a data fragment of the Akashic Record salvaged from Yggdrasil's remains.
"Major Loki, Gae Bolg is ready to fire!"

"According to the Atlantis System, synchronization between the New York headquarters, the Alaska branch, South America's first and second branches, and the Hawaii base is complete—Ready to proceed any moment!"
Hearing his subordinates' report, Loki declared sharply.
"—Fire."
Immediately, the anti-dragon ICBM on the *Naglfar*—Gae Bolg—was launched into the blue sky.
Confirming on the monitor the sight of the cruise missile flying away in a trail of flame, Loki spoke to the terminal in his hand.
"Atla, your job is to fine-tune the timing of the impacts."
The following words instantly appeared on the terminal:
'Leave it to me, Master.'
Loki smiled, satisfied with this answer. Then he looked back at the monitor, which was showing the locations and trajectories of the six Gae Bolg missiles, fired from the *Naglfar* and the five other bases.
Although they were all launched from different locations and distances, by adjusting speed and trajectory, the six missiles could be timed to strike the targeted heart simultaneously.
Just as the heart was engulfed in blinding light, noise appeared on the video feed, blacking out the monitor. Several seconds later, the image returned, showing a mushroom cloud rising into the sky.
"Verify the situation."
Loki issued a concise order. His subordinates checked the data while reporting.
"All Gae Bolgs struck their target. According to radar analysis, the target's mass has been reduced to less than one third!"
"—So it is effective?"
Loki muttered with his hand against the corner of his mouth. But after that, another subordinate cried out in surprise.
"No, wait! Target's mass rising rapidly—Regenerating... No, it has surpassed its original size—"
Before he finished, *that* appeared on the monitor.
Amid the hazy smoke, was something very large—or rather, extremely gigantic.
First to appear were wings. Piercing the mushroom cloud, the pitch-black wings blotted the sky.
Then came the tail. Glinting with a hard luster, the long tail slapped down on the sea directly below.
The seawater splashed up dozens of kilometers into the sky while a gigantic tsunami attacked nearby shores. The raging gale caused by the wings was dispersing the thick smoke with wind speeds surpassing hurricanes.
Then the exposed "heart" emerged with a dramatically altered appearance. Blood vessels were no longer visible at the heart's location. They were now inside a "body," hidden beneath heavy muscle and hard black scales. On

that carnivorous reptilian head were golden eyes shining brilliantly. White steam blew out of the mouth lined with sharp teeth. Blue-white flames were spewing out from the wings and various parts of the body, producing thrust which seemed to be sustaining this gigantic body's hovering state.
"A dragon..."
Shocked, a NIFL soldier on the bridge whispered hoarsely.
Indeed, there was no other way to describe this creature except as a dragon.
"B-Body length almost ten thousand meters... If this is a dragon, it would be the largest dragon in history! Damage inflicted by Gae Bolg impossible to determine. Furthermore, temperature sensors have detected an abnormal reaction. The air temperature surrounding the target is rapidly falling."
Listening to this report, Loki narrowed his eyes, staring intently at the giant pitch-black dragon.
"...That form resembles 'Black' Vritra greatly."
The giant dragon's appearance was reminiscent of the black dragon that had caused the first dragon disaster. As though reacting to Loki's whisper, his terminal began to vibrate. Loki looked at the screen, only to see quite a long message.
'Many points of similarities undoubtedly. Nevertheless, the dimensional micromotions associated with dark matter generation cannot be detected, thus one can conclude that the regenerated body structure arose simply from cell division. Target is 'Eternal Longevity' Bahamut—No change in this deduction.'
"Hmph... So it isn't Vritra, huh? Then let me ask you, using the weapons on this battleship—Is it possible to take down Bahamut?"
Loki kept his voice controlled and asked. A few seconds later, new words appeared on the terminal.
'Weapons should be effective against it, but considering enemy's size and rate of body reconstruction, firepower is insufficient for extermination.'
Seeing this answer, Loki frowned. At the same time, a subordinate called out.
"—Target beginning to move! W-What is this...? Target's 'shadow' is forming a new unknown territory!"
"What...? Where is the target heading?"
Loki turned his gaze to the main monitor and asked. The screen was showing the giant dragon, hovering leisurely using its huge wings. Rather than flapping its wings, the dragon was propelled by the blue flames it was discharging. The giant dragon's shadow on the sea surface was huge, but even after the dragon had gone past, the shadow remained. A new dome of unknown territory was appearing at the starting point of this black trail.
It was as though darkness kept flowing out of the pitch-black dome.
"Target moving north! Probably towards the other unknown territory in the arctic!"

"Is it planning to *link up* the domes? Although no one can predict what will happen, this does make its course quite easy to predict."
Loki thought for a moment then issued commands to his subordinates.
"Set course for the Alaska branch! After retrofitting the *Naglfar* there, we will converge with forces from the other branches. We will construct a defensive line ahead of the enemy's course and gather the entirety of NIFL's forces to intercept the monster!"
After Loki commanded, he suddenly thought of something to add as an afterthought.
"—Contact Midgard after sharing information with all branches. I wish to have a few words with the girl who pretends to be the ruler of mankind."

Chapter 1 - Marduk of Mechanized Aviation

Part 1

From my—Mononobe Yuu's—perspective, Mononobe Mitsuki was someone with greater fortitude than anyone else.
Back when she lost both parents in the car accident, my young self thought thus. Had I been in her place, what would I do?
The death of parents felt totally surreal and I could not imagine how life would continue after that. However, there was no way I would be able to hang in there—That was what I felt.
However, Mitsuki somehow recovered her past smile after becoming my little sister. After developing a fear of riding cars due to the accident, Mitsuki overcame her trauma through her own efforts.
Of course, I would protect Mitsuki as her older brother, and support her—But in the majority of cases, Mitsuki would always rely on her own strength to surmount adversity.
It was the same when "Blue" Hekatonkheir approached our town.
Mitsuki went alone to stand before the dragon. I followed only because I worried about her. To fight Hekankheir—Had Mitsuki not spelled it out, such a notion would never had occurred to me.
Watching that delicate silhouette of hers from behind... Challenging a dragon hundreds, no, thousands of times bigger than herself, I could never forget that image.
Even though Mitsuki was crying, even though she was trembling, but that image of her back was the brave silhouette that I still know.
I made a transaction with Yggdrasil to fight Hekatonkheir, only because I wanted to aid Mitsuki. I simply wanted to protect what she hoped to protect, that was all.
Three years after that, I was reunited in Midgard with a Mitsuki who had grown to become even more resolute and brave.
Despite going through the tragic ordeal of killing her best friend who had turned into a dragon, she still led the Ds in battle as the captain of the Dragon Subjugation Squad.
Despite her sorrow, despite her pain, she continued to stand strong stoicly.
But now—
"I am sorry... Nii-san, I am sorry—"
Lying on against my chest, Mitsuki kept apologizing. Sobbing and weeping, Mitsuki kept apologizing hoarsely—
I had never seen Mitsuki this "weak."

When Kraken Zwei, the orphaned child left behind by her best friend, showed up, Mitsuki had left the battlefield once.
But this time was different.
The pillar that had kept her going all this time had been totally demolished.
It was evident without needing to ask. Because, it was the same for me too.
—These feelings of mine, regarding Mitsuki as the one dearest to me.
They were what constituted my very being to this day.
But after Vritra informed me that these feelings stemmed from my instincts as a counterdragon, even I was plunged into confusion.
With wavering thoughts and emotions, I was unable to offer any consoling words to Mitsuki.
Acting like this... I must be an even "weaker" person than Mitsuki right now.

Part 2

At the dormitory where all of us lived—inside my bedroom at the far end of the corridor—There was a currently a tense atmosphere.
"Mononobe... What on earth happened?"
"Yuu, you look like you're in so much pain..."
Dressed in yukatas, Iris and Tia inquired with puzzled voices.
Midgard's principal, Charlotte, had organized a fireworks party. The staff had opened stalls for everyone to enjoy, but something had just happened. It was only natural for the girls to be confused by the pained expression on my face.
"Mononobe-kun, you clearly said you were going to meet up with us after talking to Mitsuki... But you never came."
"We were so worried about you two."
Also dressed in yukatas, Firill and Lisa spoke. Then Ariella and Ren also stared at me seriously.
"What happened to your important conversation?"
"Mm... Onii-chan, tell us."
Jeanne and Shion also went "Captain" and "Papa..." respectively, nodding to urge me to explain.
"—Looks like my mother already knows what happened."
Kili narrowed her eyes and looked at Vritra, who was beside me.
In addition to the students of Brynhildr Class, Shinomiya-sensei and Mica-san were also in my room.
They were looking in surprise at Mitsuki who was sleeping on the bed and Vritra and me, who were standing on the side. Since I had suddenly called everyone over on my portable terminal, this was only to be expected. I still had not told them the situation.
Principal Charlotte was apparently occupied so she sent Mica-san to come on her behalf.
Currently, a heavy silence shrouded the room. There was no sound outside the dorm either.
After the fireworks, night at Midgard had returned to its usual serenity. Having enjoyed the festivities, the students began to return to the girls dorms. The stalls on the sides of the coastal road also began to pack up.
Before replying to Iris' question, I first checked on Mitsuki's condition on the bed.

Apologizing nonstop, exhausted from crying, Mitsuki had fallen asleep only just earlier. If possible, I wanted to take her somewhere else without waking her up, but for the time being, I must not leave her side.
It was impossible to know when that darkness might begin to devour Mitsuki again—
That darkness, invading Mitsuki's body and manifesting the figures of the deceased... It was something Vritra called "end matter."
Recalling that darkness that was even blacker than night, I looked up at everyone present.
"Please stay calm and listen quietly to what I have to say, so that we avoid waking up Mitsuki. First of all, this is about 'true dragons' and the ninth calamity."
Saying that, I shifted my gaze, settling on Tia. This was something I had heard from Tia and Vritra but had not informed the others. To allow everyone to comprehend Mitsuki's condition, it was necessary to start from there.
"Yuu..."
Tia called my name uneasily, probably understanding the gravity of the situation. The others also waited quietly for me to continue.
To reassure Tia, I nodded and began to speak.
Leviathan, Basilisk, Hraesvelgr, Yggdrasil, Vritra—The dragons we had fought in the past were all counterdragons, born to fight "true dragons"—great calamities on a global scale. Charlotte's Code Acht and the Code Lost held by myself, Ariella, and the others, were abilities for keeping humanity, the eighth calamity, in check—
And the next great calamity... was perhaps already imminent.
Listening to these matters, everyone began to grow restless. However, I explained to them the fact that a new authority would arise to oppose this calamity.
And the being possessing this authority was "Neun." In other words, the ninth counterdragon.
Perhaps Neun was me—Mononobe Yuu.
"True dragons and counterdragons... Even if you suddenly tell us about all this, we will only end up even more confused."
Lisa sighed with her forehead against her hand. Firill nodded too with undisguised puzzlement.
"Hmm... It feels like the subject has suddenly grown somber. Oh well, we already knew you were no ordinary D, Mononobe-kun, back when you selected us, but..."
Next, Iris cried out in a realization.
"Oh—Then when you touched us, Mononobe... turning us into *your kind*, does that also mean we've turned into the ninth counterdragon species too?"
"Yes—Indeed 'tis so. Undoubtedly, ye could be considered Neun."

The one who answered Iris' question was not me but Vritra. Kili mocked her.
"That was my intention from the very start. I've always believed Yuu to be Neun and understood what it meant to be his mate. Mother, you were the one who refused to believe."
"...Hmm. I had my own reasons... Nevertheless, I confess that I have erred on this matter. Daughter, thy view was correct. Now, there is no longer any reason to doubt this person of being Neun."
Vritra replied to Kili in a slight sulk, then lightly tapped my arm. I was standing beside her.
Seeing this, Kili frowned.
"Since you are asserting so strongly, Mother, it means that there is 'reason' strong enough to prove this, right?"
Saying that, she looked at Mitsuki on the bed.
Judging from the situation, it was quite easy to associate this "reason" with the matter of Mitsuki.
"Mononobe-kun, you've been together with Mitsuki all this time?"
"Onii-chan... Where were you two during the fireworks?"
Looking at Mitsuki, Ariella and Ren asked me.
"I was talking to Mitsuki on the beach. At the time, a strange change suddenly occurred to Mitsuki."
I clenched my fist and answered.
Next, Shion, who was originally staying next to Jeanne, ran over to and looked up at me in worry.
"...Papa, aRe yOU oKaY?"
"Yeah, I'm okay."
I unclenched my fist an patted Shion on the head.
Now was not the time to be wallowing in regret. Mitsuki was the one in true pain. What I should be doing now was to tell everyone the whole story and ask for their help so that Mitsuki could be saved.
Perhaps, these thoughts and actions came from a counterdragon's instincts... But whatever, forget it for now.
Stroking Shion's hair, I looked up and saw Shinomiya-sensei standing behind Iris and the girls.
Starting from there, I swept my gaze across Mica-san and everyone else—slowly composing my words.
"In hindsight, the ninth calamity—that "darkness"—has been lurking inside Mitsuki the whole time. And just a while ago, that darkness seeped out and almost devoured Mitsuki. Vritra called it 'end matter.'"
Everyone gasped.
In sequence, I told the speechless girls what had happened on the beach. Suddenly in horrendous pain, Mitsuki's hand had turned ambiguous in outline and corrupted by pitch blackness. Just as the darkness was devouring Mitsuki, I touched her, causing my dragon mark to glow blue, blowing the darkness away...

"—The blue light caused Mitsuki's body to return to normal. However, the end matter scattered outside turned into pitch-black human forms, which I then *killed* using the power of Code Lost."
I omitted the detail that the shadows looked like Mitsuki's parents. Although I had no intention of keeping secrets... Even though Mitsuki was currently asleep, this was not something I could talk about without her presence. And right now, what agonized Mitsuki and me the most was whether my wish to protect Mitsuki came sincerely from the heart. In other words, it was a personal issue between the two of us. Discussing this with anyone would have to be left until later.
"I definitely encountered the ninth calamity in my childhood. During that car accident which killed Mitsuki's parents—I encountered the darkness of end matter at the time. Most likely, I saved Mitsuki back then using Neun's authority, but from that point on, the darkness began to lurk inside Mitsuki."
I paused at this point. Next to me, Vritra took a step forward and said:
"According to the prophesy I received from Kiskanu—in other words, a prediction of the future—There ought to be more time before the ninth dragon's arrival. However, Mononobe Mitsuki's transformation into Neun hath ended the ninth calamity's dormancy. Judging from the effects Neun's authority was capable of producing, 'tis still possible to suppress it... Be that as it may, I cannot say for sure what will happen next. Hence, I wish to enlist assistance from all of ye, Neun's mates, and Yggdrasil's successor."
Looking at everyone in turn, Vritra finally settled her gaze firmly on Tia.
As the new core of Yggdrasil that had turned into Neun too, Tia nodded solemnly.
"Tia understands the basic situation now. But what should Tia do?"
"I hope thou couldst search the Akashic Record for as much information about the seventh dragon—'Disasterification' Apocalypse—as possible, then taking the current situation into account to produce a new prediction of the future."
After listening to Vritra's request, Tia tilted her head in puzzlement.
"...The seventh calamity? Isn't it the ninth right now?"
"Kiskanu said that the seventh calamity was a prelude to an even greater calamity. And this greater calamity is precisely the ninth dragon—Hence, 'twould be highly valuable to comprehend the seventh calamity. At the time... I evaded the seventh calamity by hiding in a higher dimension, thus surviving in my complete state, and used dark matter to restore the world after the fact. Consequently, I did not have a chance to obtain a clear view of the seventh calamity."
Saying this with a depressed expression, Vritra continued.
"However, Kiskanu was destroyed by the seventh calamity. Although my restoration of plant life gave rise to a new plant network, Yggdrasil... Its core consciousness was exceedingly obsessed with prioritizing its own

survival, completely unwilling to listen to mine advice. Ostensibly, it was conquered by fear."
"Fear..."
Tia gulped and Vritra nodded solemnly.
"Indeed—Hence, I wish to know that which Kiskanu witnessed at the moment of its destruction, the true nature of the seventh calamity. If this were known, 'twould be possible to find a way to counter the ninth calamity, mayhap."
"Got it. Tia will try to contact the Akashic Record."
Tia answered with a voice of determination but next to her, Lisa showed an expression of worry.
"Tia-san, are you sure? Wouldn't there be possible danger unless you approach this cautiously?"
"Yes, so Tia wants to concentrate inside the bedroom. Also, with you accompanying Tia, if possible..."
Slightly hesitant, Tia looked up at Lisa.
"—Certainly, if I can be of assistance. I wanted to accompany you in the first place. Rest assured."
Lisa gently stroked Tia's head then looked at me.
"Mononobe Yuu, Tia-san an I shall excuse ourselves for now. Although I have yet to come to terms with the whole affair... I entrust Mitsuki-san to your care."
"Yes—I got it."
Enduring the severe pain in my heart, I agreed with Lisa.
"However, you are not allowed to be reckless."
Did Lisa feel concerned about my behavior? After giving a final reminder, she left the room with Tia.
With the shutting sound of the door, the room instantly fell silent again.
Next, Iris spoke up hesitantly.
"U-Umm, is there anything we can do? How can we save Mitsuki-chan?"
"Iris, well..."
Unable to suggest any concrete action, I could only grit my teeth. How to save Mitsuki, what to do from this point onwards, I still had not come up with anything yet.
However, Vritra tugged at my clothing during my silence.
"My comrade Neun and his mates, what ye ought to do is to keep Mononobe Mitsuki company. According to what transpired earlier, including Mononobe Mitsuki herself—End matter can be suppressed so long as two possessors of Neun's authority are present. Hence, 'twould be wise if ye were to take shifts to remain by her side."
"Vritra-chan... Yes, I got it! Then let's take turns to watch over Mitsuki-chan!"
Saying that, Iris approached me.
"Let me have the first shift. Mononobe, you should take a bit of a break. You seem so tired."

Iris urged seriously but I could not bring myself to nod and agree.
"No, since I'm the only one who has actually used Neun's authority. I can't leave Mitsuki's side—"
However, the others began to speak as though to drown out my words.
"This is your room, Mononobe-kun. I think it's best if you rest on the sofa over there, since you'll be able to know immediately if anything happened."
Firill pointed to the sofa in the room. Ariella and Ren agreed.
"We'll take turns to watch Mitsuki, don't worry."
"Mm. We will first take a nap and arrange shifts to keep watch over the night."
Listening to them, Kili sighed lightly.
"No helping it... I will help out too since there's nothing for me to do until Tia finishes her task. It seems like a nice chance to chat with Yuu. Well then, Iris-chan, I'm leaving the first shift to you."
"Yes, leave it to me!"
Iris clenched her fist hard and nodded.
Thus, after Firill and the other girls left the room, Shinomiya-sensei and Mica-san also walked to the door.
"Mononobe Yuu, we shall go report the situation to the principal. Mononobe Mitsuki is supposed to be sent underground for isolation and detailed examination... However, after analyzing what was said just now, we conclude that it is not the time to separate you two. For the purpose of isolation, this dormitory is already capable of serving the same function. Please do not go out until we contact you and watch over her well."
Holding the doorknob, Shinomiya-sensei finished. Mica-san also spoke:
"Mononobe-san, we entrust her care to you. However, just as Iris-san and the others have suggested, you should rest for a while."
"Yes, I understand."
I nodded and saw the two of them off.
"Umm, Captain, Zwei is already..."
At that moment, Jeanne, who had been silent all this time, spoke timidly.
Next to her, Shion was already rubbing her eyes, about to fall asleep.
"She's already sleepy, right? I'm sorry for making you two stay with us for so long. Take Shion back to your room, Jeanne."
The conversation just now was probably a bit too hard for Shion to understand. I smiled wryly.
"Roger that. Sorry... I am just an ordinary person without special powers... I cannot aid you in this matter, Captain."
"Don't worry about this kind of stuff. Jeanne, you're working hard as Shion's surrogate mother. This is an important job that no one can do but you. Everyone, including me, of course, are very grateful for that."
I thanked Jeanne apologetically. Staying in the room for the first shift, Iris also nodded vigorously.
"That's right! Jeanne-chan, you don't need to push yourself. Just think of Shion-chan."

"—Thank you. Then let's go, Zwei."
Smiling with a reassured look, Jeanne took Shion's hand.
"Yawn... Papa... gOoD niGHt."
"Yeah, goodnight."
Waving to me, Shion yawned lightly and I bade her goodnight.
After she left the room, the only ones remaining were the four of us—me, Iris, Vritra, and Mitsuki sleeping on the bed.
"An ordinary person without special powers?"
Looking at the doorway through where Jeanne had left, Vritra murmured in thought.
"You seem to be implying something."
Vritra smiled faintly when I cast a questioning look at her.
"No, what one might beg to differ would be the implication that humanity is not a special existence. A species regarded with hostility by Gaia twice, as the second and the eighth calamities, could not possibly be ordinary, could it?"
It looked like Jeanne's comment had prompted Vritra to make her point. She shrugged lightly and continued.
"—Furthermore, she definitely possesseth a pair of extraordinary *eyes*, yes?"
"Yeah, that's true. Jeanne's eyes are definitely not ordinary."
Vritra's question made me nod stiffly.
Capable of capturing all objects within her field of view and discerning them, it would be no exaggeration to describe Jeanne as gifted. Sleipnir was a team assembled from people like her.
"The same applieth to the authorities of counterdragons—Exceptional abilities do not exist without reason. Perhaps her abilities were inherited from Atlantis or some other origin…? 'Tis this that I am curious."
Saying that, Vritra shrugged and turned her back to me.
"You're going back to your room too, Vritra?"
"Nay, I intend to have a look at Tia Lightning's condition. Though I have informed her in detail of the type of information she needeth, one would presume that the extraction of data from the Akashic Record must be difficult indeed."
Shaking her head, Vritra left my room.
Thud. After the door closed, the room suddenly became very quiet. Mitsuki was sleeping soundly, hence, it was as though Iris and I were alone together.
"Oh, umm, Iris."
Noticing I was obliged to say something to Iris, I composed my words.
"W-What is it?"
The cowardly aura emanating from me was making Iris nervous in turn. Tensing herself, she asked in response.
"……"

However, I failed to continue. My thoughts could not come together at all.
Looking at Mitsuki on the bed, I sighed.
"Nothing, really. I guess I'm a bit tired."
Resting my forehead against my hand, I shook my head. Iris frowned in worry.
"Are you okay, Mononobe? I'll watch over Mitsuki-chan properly, so get some rest, Mononobe."
Saying that, she pushed me from behind, forcing me to the sofa.
"Hey—"
I reacted with a confused voice, but Iris ignored me. After sitting me on the sofa, she moved a chair to the side of the bed and sat down.
"Until Firill-chan comes for the next shift, I'll stay awake on watch for sure! So don't you worry."
Iris asserted forcefully and turned her face towards Mitsuki on the bed.
Seeing Iris stare unblinkingly at Mitsuki, I smiled wryly.
"Got it, I'm counting on you, Iris. However, you might fall ill too if you push yourself too hard, so relax a bit."
"Yes, okay."
Seeing Iris start taking deep breaths, I lay down on the sofa. Only then did I notice I was still wearing a yukata. However, deciding I could change later, I switched to a more comfortable posture on the sofa.
After I reclined sideways to the right, the bed entered my view. Also dressed in a yukata, Iris was watching the sleeping Mitsuki with a serious look on her face.
Watching the side of her face, the words that I had been unable to compose earlier naturally surfaced in my mind.
Yes—This matter must be conveyed to Iris.
"Iris."
"What is it?"
After I called her name, Iris took her eyes off Mitsuki, but asked while still keeping the same posture.
"Mitsuki asked me. She wanted me to tell her the answer to the question as to who was the dearest to me. She only hoped for me to make a decision rather than a choice—That was the idea."
Without touching upon explanations about the ninth dragon, I talked about "my personal issue."
"……To make a decision rather than a choice… I see…"
After a moment's silence, Iris repeated my words then smiled.
"Iris?"
"Oh, okay, sorry—I think I understand something. I'm sure Mitsuki-chan wanted you to be certain about not making a mistake."
Gazing at Mitsuki on the bed with gentle eyes, Iris replied.
"Mistake?"

"The current situation, our relationships, your inner self, Mononobe, she simply wanted to know how you feel without changing any of these—That's what I think. I'm the same too. I want to understand you better, Mononobe."
Iris answered with a blush, but she continued to speak while staying in her posture without making eye contact with me.
"However, I already know what Mitsuki-chan wanted to find out. Mononobe, you replied that Mitsuki-chan is the dearest to you, right?"
"……How do you know that?"
When I asked in surprise, Iris scratched her face.
"I know this much at least, because you are the one I love."
"—"
The straightforward confession caused my face to heat up.
"Mononobe, you said you loved me, right? That feeling is not a lie. I already knew when you selected me—However, if the question was who is the most important to you, Mitsuki-chan will definitely come to your mind. I feel that this is on a different level than simply liking someone."
"Iris—Looks like you know me better than myself."

Smiling wryly, I made fun of myself.
On a different level than simply liking someone. That was definitely true.
"That's right, it's just as you said, Iris. My reply to Mitsuki was that she was the dearest to me. But that apparently stems from my instincts as Neun, the ninth counterdragon."
Covering my face with my hands, I spoke stiffly.
"Eh...?"
"That darkness—The ninth calamity is sealed inside Mitsuki. That's why I've been instinctively protecting Mitsuki, according to Vritra. Mitsuki also heard this already."
My voice trembled slightly. I recalled how Mitsuki had apologized to me endlessly.
"N-No way—"
"To be honest, I haven't put my feelings in order yet. I can't tell which emotions come from myself and which ones are out of Neun's instincts. It's precisely because I'm currently in this state that I wasn't able to say anything to Mitsuki."
I bit my lip hard as chagrin gripped my heart.
"Mononobe..."
"Sorry, I'm not asking for you to comfort or trying to discuss this with you. I'll find the answer on my own, but it's just that I feel that I must tell you about this. That's why—"
Unable to think of words to continue, I stopped there.
The room plunged into silence. After who knew how long, I heard Iris' whisper.
"Yes—I believe in you. If it's you, Mononobe, things will surely work out."

Part 3

Somehow, I fell asleep.
I opened my eyes, realizing after my nap.
So sleepy—I really wanted to remain in the land of dreams.
However... Strangely, my body felt heavy.
As for where this weight came from, I found ou as soon as I opened my eyes, greeted by the sight before me.
"Gu..."
A petite red-haired girl—Ren Miyazawa—was sleeping on top of me. She was curled up like a cat, soundly asleep...
Having changed, she was wearing her usual uniform instead of a yukata.
What on earth was happening? I looked waround then noticed Ariella sitting on the chair next to the bed.
Having taken over Iris' seat, Ariella had been watching the sleeping Mitsuki the whole time.
I shifted my body slightly and the sofa sank down. This sound prompted Ariella to look over.
"Oh, Mononobe-kun—You woke up. Hmm... Are you okay like that?"
Smiling wryly, Ariella rose up from her chair and came over to me. Since Ren was sleeping on me, I could not get up. Lying there on the sofa, I looked at Ariella.
"It'd be great if you could explain the current situation."
When I asked, Ariella scratched her cheek awkwardly.
"Umm... It's my turn to watch over Mitsuki and Ren came along."
"Why?"
Unable to comprehend, I asked.
"Well, Ren and I are roommates—Since I came over here, it means that Ren'd be left alone in the room, right?"
"Yeah, but what's the problem there?"
I frowned and looked up at Ariella. Then glancing at Ren, she knelt down next to me and whispered in my ear.
"I hope you'll keep this a secret... But Ren is scared of sleeping alone... She can't sleep like that."
Ariella spoke with an expression as though revealing an important secret.
But for Ren, perhaps this really was strictly confidential.
"—I see, I get it now. I'll pretend I never heard the previous exchange. But I can't believe she chose to sleep on top of me out of all places."

Sighing, I looked at the soundly sleeping Ren. Inside my room, the only places to sleep comfortably were the bed and the sofa. Sleeping on me should not be very comfy.
"Ren is able to sleep anywhere as long as she's by the side of someone she finds reassuring. Your heartbeat allows her to relax and fall asleep straight away. As expected of Ren's 'Onii-chan'."
Now that she pointed it out, indeed, Ren's ear was pressed against the left side of my chest. After stroking her red hair softly, I looked at Ariella again.
"I'm glad that Ren trusts me so much, but I can no longer sleep in this posture. I'm going to yield the sofa to her, so could you pick her up gently without waking her up?"
"Got it. Leave it to me."
Ariella nodded and used her arms to pick up Ren securely. Taking the opportunity, I got off the sofa and stood up to stretch. Despite her petite size, having a person's entire weight on me still made me stiff and uncomfortable. It felt like sleep paralysis. Thinking that, I looked at Mitsuki sleeping on the bed.
"How is Mitsuki doing?"
I whispered to Ariella, who was poking Ren's cheeks while she was sleeping on the sofa.
"She woke up once when Firill was on watch, but she immediately went back to sleep without making a scene."
"She woke up once, huh—Uh, what's the time now?"
Since it was dark outside the window, I had no sense of the passage of time. I glanced at the clock, only to see the hands indicating 4am. This hour could be considered morning.
"Mononobe-kun, you slept for almost five hours. Well, I'm really glad you woke up before Kili's shift. If you were still sleeping, I'm sure she'll... Umm, do weird things."
Ariella spoke with mild blush. Perhaps she was recalling last time when Kili visited me during the night.
"No, you probably don't need to worry about that. If it's Kili, I'll definitely wake up the moment she tries to do anything."
I smiled wryly and shook my head. Ren was able to climb on top of me without waking me up because she was not someone I needed to keep my guard up against. Against anyone dangerous, I had full confidence in my ability to wake up immediately to handle the situation.
"Very well... But I get the feeling you might get swayed by the situation even if you're careful, Mononobe-kun—"
"..."
Unable to deny her words, I could not say anything.
"I said it before, Mononobe-kun, but you need to pull yourself together. Especially against Kili, you have to be more assertive."
Arms akimbo, Ariella cautioned me.
"But she's not someone who'll comply obediently, right?"

"That's where you're wrong. I think she'd go along with your demands, Mononobe-kun, if you're forceful. Rather, she'd be happy about it."
"H-Happy?"
The unexpected word left me confused. I looked at Ariella questioningly.
"She is similar to me in some ways, so I know. Kili probably likes a partner who's better and stronger than her. So on a basic level, she's a passive person, or rather, she wants to be led."
"A passive person... In other words, she's a masochist?"
I shared my view to concur with Ariella's opinion, but she instantly went red in the face.
"M-Masochist—What are you suddenly talking about!? If Kili's like that, then aren't I also... Th-That's so obscene..."
Seeing Ariella totally flustered, I hastily waved my hands.
"No, what I mean is personality tendencies—I didn't mean to say anything obscene. Ariella, haven't you ever chatted with others about whether someone looks like an S or an M?"
"...Looks like? Oh, you mean in that sense. I thought you were being serious..."
"Serious?"
Puzzled, I asked Ariella who was wiping sweat from her brow in relief, then she immediately went red and denied it.
"Nothing, nothing at all! It's true that I've discussed this with Lisa and the others in detail! Firill even brought a book with a personality quiz."
"Eh, then which one came out as the analysis result for Kili?"
Interested, I tried asking but Ariella shook her head.
"It happened before we met Kili."
"Then what about you, Ariella?"
"……M."
Looking away from me, Ariella answered in a barely audible voice.
"M-Mononobe-kun, let me be clear, it wasn't just me! Lisa and Mitsuki were M too! Also, that book itself was quite weird, its credibility—"

Ariella furiously explained herself with an intense blush, causing me to relax my expression.
"—W-What are you laughing at!?"
"Sorry, but you're just so cute, Ariella."
I apologized with a wry smile, causing Ariella to hold her breath, frozen on the spot.
"C... C-C-C-Cute—Could you not... say this sort of thing... so suddenly..."
Her voice became softer and softer while she lowered her head awkwardly.
"……Sorry."
I apologized again. Since I said it unintentionally, Ariella's reaction caused me to blush instead.
"Then who tested as S, Ariella?"
At this rate, the mood was going to become very awkward, so I hastily changed the subject.
"Ah, well—It might be quite surprising, but Iris was an S."
"That's definitely surprising... But on further thought, Iris gave Kili a '-chan' honorific and completely forced Kili to go along with her pace. Perhaps, that's—"
I crossed my arms and imagined Iris as a sadist...
Picturing Iris holding a whip, laughing madly, I hastily shook my head to dispel the image.
"—Totally unsuitable."
"Hmm?"
I smiled wryly at Ariella who had reacted to my muttering.
"Don't worry about it. Oh well, anyway, I'll remember your advice to be more assertive towards Kili."
"Y-Yeah, I hope you'll achieve it for sure... Also, umm, now that you're awake, go take a bath and get changed. With you looking like that, I don't know where to look anymore... Oh, I'll keep watch over Mitsuki, so don't worry."
Saying that, Ariella pointed at me. I looked down, only to see my yukata's collar wide open.
"—Got it, I'll do that."
While fixing up my clothes, I nodded at Ariella.
However, just as I was carrying a change of clothes into the bathroom's changing area, a ringtone was suddenly heard in the room.
"S-Sorry, that's mine—"
Ariella hastily took out her portable terminal from her pocket, but this sound was coming from more than one place. From the bed where Mitsuki was sleeping, Ren's sofa, and from my breast pocket—In any case, everyone's portable terminal was ringing.
"Mm...?"
Ren rubbed her eyes drowsily and sat up.

Before I pressed the button to pick up the call, the screen turned on automatically on the terminal. Then Midgard's chief administrator, Charlotte B. Lord, appeared.
"Members of Brynhildr Class, an emergency situation has arisen."
The principal who looked like a young child was fidgeting with her blonde hair nervously, speaking in a somber voice.
'Just now, a certain someone from NIFL—a name that probably none of us wish to hear for the time being—that Loki Jotunheim has contacted us.'
"Major Loki...?"
Charlotte nodded gravely when I spoke his name quietly. Images of everyone in the conversation were displayed on the monitors in the command center.
'Indeed... In any case, all of you need to look at this.'
After she said that, the screen changed. A towering black dome under a blue sky was shown on my terminal. Since there were no objects in view for reference, I could not estimate its size, but I already knew that this was a gigantic object.
This was because it was completely unreflective and lacked three dimensionality in appearance. It seemed like a hole floating amid the surrounding scenery, completely a deep abyss of darkness... This reminded me of the "darkness" attempting to devour Mitsuki and a chill ran through my body.
"Several hours ago, this type of dome had appeared at four locations across the world. With a diameter of three hundred kilometers or so and a height of roughly fifty kilometers, these domes are exceptionally large and impossible to observe their interiors. Hence, these spaces are currently called unknown territories."
"Unknown territories..."
—Could this be related to the "darkness" inside Mitsuki?
It was impossible to consider them coincidences with such timing.
'Although many towns have been swallowed, no one has come out of these domes. What emerged... was only this.'
Accompanying Charlotte's narration, the screen changed to show a strange entity hovering next to a dome.
It was gigantic heart covered by a spherical network of blood vessels. This surreal scene made Ariella exclaim in a confused voice.
"What is this..."
'That was the image when the entity first emerged. Now, it has transformed to this.'
Next, the screen changed to show a gigantic black "creature." A pitch-black dragon with wings outspread, hovering in the air—
"Isn't this Vritra? No, it's probably not—"
It was quite similar to the stand-in that the black dragon had created previously.

However, Vritra was currently with us in the form of a young girl.
Furthermore, the dragon in the image was far too humongous.
During class, I had seen images of Vritra's first appearance twenty-five years ago, but it should not have been this big.
'Hmm—Please wait a moment. Tia Lightning apparently has something to inform all of us.'
As Charlotte spoke, an image of Tia appeared on the bottom right corner of the screen. With Lisa and Vritra behind her, it was probably Tia's bedroom.
'Umm, Tia has something to say.'
Tia spoke solemnly, but Vritra went over her shoulder and leaned forward to interrupt.
'Make no mistake, that is not I. 'Tis the model I referenced to create the dragon stand-in of mine, although I merely read the data provided by Kiskanu, this could very well be—'
'Stop! This is Tia's turn to speak! Don't get in Tia's way!'
Shoving away the interrupting Vritra, out of the screen, Tia spoke again.
'Through the connection to the Akashic Record, Tia knows what it is. It is from long long ago... The fifth calamity that visited Earth—the fifth dragon, "Eternal Longevity" Bahamut.'
"What..."
—Not the ninth but the fifth?
The urgent and imminent calamity was the ninth while the fifth should be in the past. It was a crisis that the world was supposed to have overcome.
The unexpected words made me gasp, but Charlotte did not seem surprised on the screen, only troubled.
'How odd, this name of Bahamut is the same as the codename assigned by NIFL. Do they actually have information on the fifth calamity...?'
Charlotte voiced her doubts but no one was able to give an answer.
'Why NIFL knows about Bahamut, Tia has no idea either. However... Bahamut appearing is in itself very strange! Because Bahamut was clearly defeated by Basilisk, the holder of Code Fünf...'
The confused Tia explained the abnormality of the situation.
"By Basilisk? Then Iris, having inherited that authority—"Catastrophe"—would be able to take out that crazy huge dragon?"
Was it due to my whispered comment? Iris appeared on the bottom left of the screen. It looked like she had been sleeping until earlier since she was dressed in a flimsy negligee.
'Eh!? M-Me?'
Iris pointed to her own face in panic. However, Charlotte crossed her arms with a grave expression.
'—It would be too soon to assert that. However, it is impossible to say for certain until we see the outcome of the attempt.'
"Attempt? Then—"
When I spoke out, Charlotte nodded.

'Yes, NIFL has requested our cooperation. While Bahamut continues to move, the unknown territory is expanding at the same time. This is no time to be staying uninvolved and watching from the sidelines. Furthermore...'
She paused for a moment, then spoke again as though she had dispelled her hesitation.
'Bahamut's expected route includes many countries—including the Principality of Erlia, the homeland of one of our Ds, Firill Crest. If Bahamut were to deviate slightly from predictions, even Lisa Highwalker's homeland of England would not be spared.'
This information brought alarm to the face of Lisa, who was behind Tia. Although not shown on the screen, Firill was probably starting to worry too.
'In order to protect the homelands for these maidens, the Ds, to return to, I have accepted NIFL's request as Midgard's top command. Considering the links between this and the ninth calamity reported earlier, as well as "Catastrophe," you are the only ones capable of taking on this mission. Although it pains my heart to send you to a dangerous battlefield again... I hope all of you will aid in this endeavor.'
"Of course—Then what exactly do we have to do?"
I replied instantly and asked Charlotte for our mission. In the same room as me, Ariella and Ren also nodded without hesitation.
'...Thank you, my friend and the young maidens. You will join NIFL's defense line to intercept Bahamut together. However... There is a serious problem here.'
Charlotte thanked us but for some reason, her expression turned very grim.
"Problem?"
'We have no means of transport. Originally, we could meet up with NIFL by ship transport on the sea, which would then allow you to head to the scene by plane or helicopter. However, there is not a single NIFL ship in Midgard's surroundings at the moment. It was my demand after the battle that NIFL withdraw its forces completely... I never thought it would come to bite us in return.'
Charlotte sighed with her hand against her forehead. However, I asked:
"All we need to do is fly to where NIFL is, right? That'll greatly shorten the time until rendezvous."
'The NIFL force sent to pick you up is extremely distant. It would be too far to fly using transmutation, exhausting you greatly before the battle. However... Perhaps we have no other options.'
Charlotte was very troubled, but Tia raised her hand vigorously from the small window on the screen.
'Wait! In that case, Tia has a better idea!'
"Tia?"
I responded in surprise and Tia brought her fist to her chest and said seriously.
'Well, Tia thinks that we just need to complete Marduk together!'
"Complete Marduk, what do you mean—"

Unable to understand Tia's words, I was baffled.
Marduk was a weapon system used by Atlantis, the ancestors of mankind. In order to defeat dragons such as Leviathan and Hraesvelgr, I had used transmuted dark matter to recreate parts of Marduk.
It was true that every weapon of Marduk was very powerful, but currently, the problem was meeting up with NIFL. I could not see how these two matters were connected.
However, Tia continued to speak to Charlotte.
'Principal, please. Order all Ds to assemble at the harbor right now.'
'Sure, I can do that, but...'
Charlotte seemed worried but still nodded.
'Okay, let's all go to the harbor!'
Having obtained permission, Tia hung up without explaining in detail. On the screen with one less small window, Charlotte sighed.
'It fills me with guilt to disturb the sweet dreams of young maidens when the sun has yet to rise—But there is no other way. Let us listen to her explanation at the harbor.'
Then the portable terminal's screen went dark and my room returned to peace and quiet.

"Nii-san, stop standing there, spacing out. Hurry and get changed. Ariella-san and Ren-san, please get prepared to set off."

Surprised by the voice that broke the silence, I turned to face the bed.
Had she woken up without my noticing? Sitting up on the bed, Mitsuki was holding her portable terminal, looking at me.
"Mitsuki..."
I called out her name hoarsely.
"You woke up. Are... you fine now?"
"Mm, do you feel unwell anywhere?"
Ariella and Ren also noticed and asked Mitsuki with worry.
"Yes—I am fine. I am fully informed too. I shall... make a trip to my room first."
Saying that, Mitsuki got off the bed. Like me, she was still wearing her yukata. She was probably planning to change into her uniform in her room.
"Wait, even if you're fine right now, Mitsuki, it's best you avoid being alone."
I frantically tried to stop Mitsuki who was making her way to the door.
"...Yes, good point. Because of the ninth calamity, right...? When I woke up previously, Firill-san already told me about taking shifts to watch over me. In that case... Ariella-san and Ren-san should come with me, so no need to worry, Nii-san."
Pausing in her steps, Mitsuki spoke in an exceedingly calm voice.
This was probably the calmness she tried her hardest to feign while enduring the pain that was tearing her heart apart.

"But—"
"Nii-san, are you actually trying to watch me change? If you say yes, you will have to write a repentance essay, you know?"
Smiling weakly, Mitsuki cautioned me.
"……Understood. Okay, Ariella and Ren, I'm leaving Mitsuki in your hands."
Despite my hesitation, I nodded and entrusted Mitsuki to them.
"Got it. I'll contact you straight away if anything happens. No need to worry."
"Mm, don't worry."
Next, Mitsuki left my room, accompanied by Ariella and Ren.
I knew I ought to say something else—I knew I ought to do something.
However, what exactly was it? No matter how I racked my brain, I did not know.

Part 4

At the break of dawn, Midgard's entire student body was gathered at the harbor. Unsure of the situation, the girls were showing apprehensive expressions towards the tense atmosphere around them.
Currently, there were no ships moored at the harbor, so the view was expansive. The orange sun was emerging from the eastern horizon, its golden glow reflecting off the clouds in the sky.
Prepared to sortie, we members of the Brynhildr Class were together with Charlotte and Shinomiya-sensei, listening to Tia while standing on the pier some distance from the other students.
"So—Marduk is actually a giant ship!"
Tia spread her slender arms forcefully to express the ship's great size.
"A ship... Speaking of which, back when we first saw NIFL's battleship, Tia-san did mention before that it felt similar to Marduk somehow."
Hearing Lisa whispering with a hand to the corner of her mouth, I remembered too.
It was during the final moments of NIFL's invasion—when we had clearly defeated Major Loki—the NIFL battleship moored at sea had switched to attack mode.
'That ship... Somehow, it feels similar.'
Tia had said so at the time. When we asked for an explanation, she had continued.
'A weapon from Atlantis... Marduk...'
Furthermore, Tia had warned that the main cannon, prepared to fire, might be Babel, a weapon from a lost civilization.
In fact, the main cannon's firepower was exceptional—While Ariella deployed a barrier, Tia hacked the ship, thus enabling us to survive the crisis.
However, it was still unknown why NIFL possessed such a battleship.
During my time at NIFL, I had passed along Atlantean weapons data to my friend in the technological development department, thus allowing practical deployment of Nergal and Gáe Bolg... However, back then, I did not have data on Babel.
The anti-dragon weapons created through the transmutation of dark matter would self-destruct after use, so it would be impossible to obtain data from them.

After the battle, I wanted to inquire about this if there had been a chance to talk to Major Loki… But since no such chance came up, it remained an unanswered question in the end.
"Tia—I know that the anti-dragon armament named Marduk is part of a gigantic weapon. During my second transaction with Yggdrasil, I sensed it."
Seeking to defeat the Leviathan that was trying to turn Iris into its mate, I desired new power. Responding to my wish, Yggdrasil transmitted the data of Marduk's main cannon to me. Back then, I found out that Marduk was a weapon armed with various modes of attack.
Afterwards, Marduk's data was supplemented by two additional downloads, but still incomplete.
"—In other words, Marduk's complete form is similar to NIFL's battleship?"
I recalled the various Atlantean weapons I had made so far and asked Tia.
Main cannon—"Babel."
Special artillery—"Meggido."
Psionic multi-barreled cannon—"Noah."
Hyperspace reversion rocket-assisted artillery—"Abyss."
I still could not imagine Marduk's complete form, equipped with all these weapons.
"More amazing that that, it's a ship that can fly into space."
"S-Space?"
The sudden word shocked me, but Tia's face was serious.
"Indeed. The counterweapon mobilized to eliminate external threats to the Atlanteans regardless of any environment, that is the 'Deus Dragon,' Marduk."
"Deus Dragon… the second calamity's trump card."
Kili whispered with interest.
The Atlanteans were the ancestors of mankind and possessed superb levels of science and technology. Arriving at Earth from space, their civilization was regarded by Gaia as a threat to the planet—as the second dragon, "Ultimate Wisdom" Atlantis. "Deus Dragon" was probably a term to express the true nature of this threat.
"Yes, which is why it should be able to fly over to Bahamut immediately. But since it's so huge, it requires a great amount of dark matter. Tia doesn't know if borrowing everyone's help is enough…"
Seeing all the students gathered at the harbor, Tia said with worry.
"—Release these bonds of mine and no such problem would exist."
Vritra interrupted next. Indeed, in her case, she should be able to generate dark matter on a level far beyond us. But currently, she was unable to perform transmutation due to the vine choker Tia had made.
"Right! Let's have Vritra-chan help out too!"
Iris' face brightened up but Ariella shook her head with a reluctant expression.

"Let's not... We don't know what Vritra'd do with full ability to generate dark matter. Even if she cooperates with us now, we might end up as enemies like before if the situation changed."
Ren and Firill agreed with her.
"Mm, too big of a risk."
"I agree. We don't know if our dark matter is really insufficient either..."
Vritra shrugged in response.
"...Presently, I must fight alongside my comrade Neun—Fine, 'tis futile to demand ye to trust me."
Despite speaking as though she had not placed any hopes in the first place, Vritra acted a little like she was sulking. I patted her on the head.
"Thanks for offering to help. When we're really out of options, we'll borrow your power."
"Hmph, then ye ought not miss your chance. 'Twould be too late if ye dally."
Vritra turned her face away, speaking with slight displeasure.
"Yeah, I got it. Then we'll start constructing Marduk."
I nodded and looked at everyone.
"I can only watch this time. Zwei—please help Papa... in my place."
Not a D, Jeanne gritted her teeth and patted Shion on the arm.
"i Got iT. Papa, i'LL hElp yOu."
Shion nodded firmly and walked over to hold my hand.
"—Thanks."
I gripped Shion's hand in return then looked my silent little sister—Mitsuki.
"Mitsuki, umm..."
Unable to make eye contact with her, I could only speak while looking at her chest.
"Rest assured, I shall assist in constructing Marduk too. Also, I have not mentioned it yet, but I shall be coming along as well. Given how I must not leave your side currently, Nii-san, I have no other choice."
Just as I was struggling to find words, Mitsuki gave her reply first.
"Mitsuki..."
Indeed, after waking up, Mitsuki had neither said she was unwell nor did she cause any commotion.
However, she was definitely not herself.
She was forcing herself. She was putting on a brave face. Even without looking at her face, without listening to her voice, I could tell instantly.
However, I did not point this out to deprive her of the "fortitude" she had been desperately trying to maintain.
"Got it. Then I'm counting on you too, Mitsuki."
I nodded decisively and Mitsuki answered "yes" in relief. Next, she instantly tensed her expression and turned to the noisy students.
"Please listen to me, everyone."
All the noise instantly vanished as soon as Mituski spoke as the student council president and captain of the Dragon Subjugation Squad.

Although there were girls watching her with worried gazes, there was definite trust in Mitsuki conveyed through their eyes.
"Currently, catastrophic changes have occurred all over the world. Our homelands in various countries are under threat. The giant creature known as Bahamut is the one expanding the affected areas. Brynhildr Class will be heading out to defeat this creature."
Mitsuki was facing the students and her back view was filled with intense vigor as always. However, this vigor was probably squeezed out through her desperate efforts.
"The remainder of the Dragon Subjugation Squad, please guard Midgard as best as you can. Furthermore, I have a request to make of all of you. In order to construct the ship necessary for hastening to the battlefield, we need a huge quantity of dark matter. Those willing to lend us your aid, could you kindly hold hands with people beside you to form a circle?"
Despite the sudden request, the students began to hold hands with one another without questioning.
All the hesitation on everyone's face disappeared. This was proof that each student believed that Mitsuki was pointing out the correct path.
Seeing this, Shinomiya-sensei asked Charlotte.
"Principal, how is the condition of Midgardsormr?"
"Mica is on standby in the command center. As soon as I give the order, the naval route will be secured. You will be able to set off immediately once the ship is built. If possible, I would like to accompany all of you... But I cannot break my agreement with the United Nations to remain on this island. Furthermore—since my authority is only effective against humans, I am no help to my friend."
Holding a portable terminal, Charlotte answered then looked at me.
"You must return safe and sound. This is my only request for you all."
"Yeah, it's a promise."
While we were talking, the students had already formed a circle.
"Then everyone, let us join in too."
Mitsuki urged us and I entered the circle, holding Shion by the hand.
"Tia will transmit the missing data to Yuu, so this position is essential."
Saying that, Tia took my other hand, opposite to Shion.
"Do your best, Mononobe."
Next to Tia, Iris encouraged me.
"Nii-san, please give the signal once you are ready. After that, we will start transmitting dark matter to you."
Mitsuki spoke to me from next to Shion.
I nodded at them then took a deep breath.
Jeanne, Vritra, Charlotte, and Shinomiya-sensei were watching us slightly further away.
"So, Tia—Send me Marduk's data."
"Yes, got it."

Tia's little hand began to tighten her grip while electricity sparked in the vicinity of the small red horns on her head.
In that instant, a numbing sensation moved to my brain from my hand that Tia was holding. A flash of light filled my mind, turning my view pure white.
Due to the blinding feeling, I closed my eyes.
Like torrent, the surging information gradually melded together into several lines. The lines slowly came together as data of the anti-dragon armament, supplementing it to completion, illustrating a gigantic outline.
—This was Marduk.
I could not help but shudder all over.
Possessing the power to defeat hostile species for the Atlanteans on multiple occasions, its existence filled me with fear.
In order to project the form in my mind to reality, I opened my tightly shut eyes.
What appeared before me was the blue ocean under the morning sun.
Watching the splashing waves on the water surface, I gave the order.
"Lend me your strength, everyone!"
"Please concentrate dark matter in Nii-san, everyone!"
Mitsuki instantly shouted to all the students.
Instantly, a flood of dark matter flowed into me, then manifested into a gigantic black sphere before my eyes.
Dark matter consisted of fragments of emotions. Everyone's feelings were flooding my mind, causing me to start losing myself.
Normally, performing transmutation in such a state would be impossible, but there was no need for me to impose control over these emotions—this dark matter.
All I needed to do was pour the blueprints in my mind into the flow, thereby giving form to the dark matter.
"Deus Dragon—Marduk!"
I conferred a name upon the burgeoning dark matter, bestowing a rightful path for the matter that held endless possibility.
"Anti-dragon armament, Full Revive!!"
The pitch-black mist of dark matter, expanding over the sea, gradually increased in density and started turning from a gas into a solid.
"...Still not enough. Everyone, please muster more!"
I performed transmutation while calling out.
If the dark matter was insufficient, then an incomplete Marduk with missing parts would be materialized. Since this was a weapon harboring massive power, incompleteness could result in a gigantic explosion.
"Mmmmmm!"
The one with the greatest generating capacity, Ren, desperately squeezed out her final strength.
Gritting their teeth, everyone else transmitted dark matter to me.
The mist of dark matter grew dense all at once.
It was here—

Feeling a concrete sensation, I accelerated the rate of transmutation, displaying the majestic appearance of the Atlantean weapon on the sea. Solidified from mist, the entity shone with hard silver luster. Accompanied by the loud noise of waves, a gigantic battleship appeared.
The surging waves hit the breakwater, producing a splash of white spray. However, no one dodged.
Everyone was fixated on the object that had appeared before them.
Only told that they were going to build a ship, the students could not hide their surprise at all. Even having seen the construction of anti-dragon weapons up close before, Iris and the girls could only gasp, rooted to the spot.
"—What an amazing ship."
Charlotte's exclamation reached my ear.
Ship, battleship—Sure enough, such descriptions were probably the closest. Roughly two hundred meters in length, the ship's body was covered with silver-white armor with grooves, tracing out a network of geometric patterns reminiscent of pulsating blood vessels, brightening and dimming in periodic cycles.
Protruding sharply in the front, the prow was merged with the main cannon of Babel. Split into two, its barrel featured a lens in the middle that was reflecting the morning sunlight with dazzling radiance.
Weapons were concentrated on the front of the ship's surface. Megiddo's giant barrel was installed at two locations, a total of eight of Noah's multi-barreled turrets—Aimed at the glowing morning sky, they looked especially impressive.
Behind the bridge were the missile pods of Abyss. On the two sides of the ship were variable-sweep wings, gravitational control devices used for flight.
In addition to the data stored in my mind, my senses were naturally extended, providing me with a full grasp of the entire ship's capabilities. Just as the anti-dragon weapons created through transmutation previously were always linked to my consciousness, this ship was synchronized with me.
"So this is... Marduk."
While confounded by my suddenly expanded senses, I looked up at the Atlantean weapon that had materialized.
This was a power that did not belong to this era. Once used, it would surely become a disaster equal to the dragons.
But right now, to oppose an even greater calamity, I must control this power—
"—"
After warning myself, I felt a bone-piercing pain through my head, causing me to frown.
Sure enough, being connected to such a massive and complicated weapon was burdening my mind with even greater strain.

"Yuu?"
Noticing my symptoms, Tia looked up at me, tilting her head in worry.
"—I'm fine. Come, let's go."
I released Tia's hand and walked over to Marduk, moored against the harbor.
Although the headache persisted, I optimistically believed that I would get used to it with time. Even if the headache did not go away, what I needed to do remained the same. This was no time to show weakness.
Although the enemy before us was Bahamut, the black domes appearing all over the world were reminiscent of the ninth calamity's "darkness."
If the ninth calamity was the true culprit, losing this battle was not an option. In order to protect Mitsuki, this too was essential.
Whether instinct or otherwise, what drove my actions were these feelings.
I stopped in front of the ship and raised my hand.
"Marduk, activate."
The newborn Deus Dragon growled and awakened.
After the geometric patterns carved on the ship's body glowed brightly, one part of its external walls opened up from inside, producing a gangway leading into the ship.
I placed one foot onto the first step and turned around.
"Are we all ready?"
"Y-Yes, all okay!"
Iris replied with a nervous expression and the others nodded with resolve on their faces.
"Very well—Let's depart."
Turning forward again, I started up the gangway.
As though welcoming its passengers, Marduk's body rumbled thunderously while it started up.

Chapter 2 - Atlantis the Electronic Fairy

Part 1

A complicated maze of passages illuminated by milky-white lighting filled the interior of Marduk.
However, I already knew the internal layout like the back of my hand thanks to my link to Marduk. I first took everyone to the bridge in the top part of the ship's interior. Every shut door opened automatically in response to my intention to open it.
The bridge was a domed structure with a diameter of roughly ten meters. After I entered, the ceiling displayed images from all around the ship's surroundings. I took a look around and could even see Charlotte and the students at the harbor.
Everyone was exclaiming in awe and surprise. Accompanying us as Midgard's commanding officer, Shinomiya-sensei walked over to the seat located at the front of the domed room.
There was one seat in the very center of the domed room with three more in front on the circular edge. This looked a bit few, but I knew clearly it was enough. This ship could be used properly even if there was only one user linked to Marduk.
"This is an Atlantean weapon, huh? Although you are able to control it without problems, Mononobe Yuu, are others capable of operating this ship? Though there is a console... I cannot read the language at all. I hope there is some kind of communications channel to ensure contact with Midgard and NIFL."
Shinomiya-sensei looked a bit troubled.
"Oh—About that..."
Although I could feel how things were used, articulating it was quite difficult. At that moment, Tia poked out her head from beside me and answered on my behalf.
"Don't worry, just let Tia do it! Leave it to Tia!"
With a flash of electricity from Tia's red horns, static appeared momentarily on the dome-shaped monitor.
"Uh... Hmm... If I copy Midgard's... Roughly like this—"
Tia murmured to herself for a while, opening a window on the monitor in front of a seat. The language on the console also turned into letters of the Latin alphabet.
"Tia tried installing an Asgard-compatible virtual OS inside the Marduk System. Will that work?"

After listening to Tia, Ren jogged over to the empty seat.
"Mm, let's confirm. It seems very interesting."
Ren looked incredibly excited as she started to operate the console.
"……Mm. Feels like it'll work. I should be able to understand the entire system by starting here. Analyzing the ship's drive system will take time… But opening up a comm channel should be instant."
Hearing Ren's reply, Shinomiya-sensei breathed a sigh of relief.
"Excellent, then I would have a job to do. Leave negotiations with NIFL to me. Roughly three hours from now, NIFL's forces at the first defense line in the Arctic Ocean will begin to engage Bahamut… Will we make it in time? If not, then there is the second defense line set up in the waters of Norway—"
"It's fine, Marduk will definitely make it."
Sensing the ship's "power" as though it were my own limb, I asserted. There was enough time even if we traveled normally within the atmosphere. If necessary, we could even exit the atmosphere to fly along a ballistic trajectory.
"Very well, then let us set a course for the rendezvous point with the forces at the first defense line. The coordinates are—"
After Shinomiya-sensei gave the latitude and longitude, Ren immediately operated the console to display the map on the monitor.
From my senses, I learned that Marduk's systems understood that this was the destination.
The mild headache persisted, but my expanded consciousness filled me with a sense of omnipotence. I felt as though I was capable of anything right now.
"—Roger that. Marduk, set sail."
Sitting on the seat in the middle of the room, with the best visibility, I increased the depth of my synchronization with Marduk. As though moving my fingers, I retracted the gangway and locked the hatch. Main engine ignited—The ship moved forward dead slow.
Marduk began to launch slowly, gradually leaving the harbor.
I turned on the external sound output to speak with the people seeing us off.
"Well then—We are setting off."
Then I turned around and gestured to Iris and the girls with my hand.
After showing a look as though awakening from a dream, Iris took a deep breath and yelled.
"We're off!"
This triggered everyone else to say the usual parting pleasantries. Yet to develop a sense of belonging at Midgard, Kili and Vritra did not join in, but they did not interject either.
The bridge monitor showed the crowd, gradually receding away.
'—All of you must come back!!'
Waving her hand vigorously from the harbor, Charlotte's voice from the speaker echoed in the bridge. Then came the "safe travels" well wishes from the students to send us off.

Once I decided there was sufficient distance from the harbor, I raised the engine output and took formal control of Marduk.
On the sides of the ship, the main wings swung out, activating the gravitational control devices—
The video feed on the dome's ceiling monitor began to change. Midgard and the ocean were gradually receding away.
Even though we did not feel any shaking at all in the bridge, Marduk had taken off and was already hovering in the air.
Liberated from the constraints of gravity, the ship used its wings to stabilize itself and switched to atmospheric flight mode.
"—Off we go."
I spoke briefly.
The main engine increased in output. The main thrusters ignited. Acceleration began.
Slight vibration was felt in the bridge. Due to the rapid acceleration, the scenery flew past quickly. Centered around our flight direction, the clouds were stretched radially into thin trails.
Midgard was out of sight. What extended before our eyes was the blue of the sky and the ocean, as well as the white clouds, drawn out and receding to the back.
With the blue horizon as the destination, the ship flew. Once cruising speed in the atmosphere was reached, I stopped accelerating and leaned against the seat rest.
"Phew... Now all that's left is to fly straight towards the destination."
Persistent control would increase the burden on the mind excessively, so I reduced my synchronization with Marduk and switched to auto-pilot mode.
The headache, which I had forgotten while I was concentrating, resurfaced, causing me to shake my head.
"Good work, Mononobe-kun. You really nailed that captain feel."
Firill emerged from behind my seat and laughed mischievously.
"...I'm just the pilot. Shinomiya-sensei is the captain."
I replied wryly and Shinomiya-sensei looked back.
"No, regarding this ship, you are the captain. I am just the communications officer."
"I'm the sysadmin."
Staring at the monitor, tapping away at the console, Ren remarked without turning her head.
"Then what about us?"
With nothing assigned to her currently, Iris brought a finger to the side of her mouth and cocked her head.
"Hmm... Ordinary crew, I guess?"
After Ariella spoke, Shion asked Jeanne:
"cRew? whAt DoEs cRew dO?"
"Uh, let me think... People who do all kinds of work on a ship... I suppose?"
However, Kili shrugged after listening.

"But is there any work to do here?"
"Know that I have no wish to do work."
Vritra frowned and objected to working. Looking a bit exasperated, Lisa asked me:
"I shall do everything within my ability. Mononobe Yuu, is there anything I can offer assistance with?"
"No—Not at the moment. At this speed, it will take roughly two and a half hours to reach the destination... Lisa, you girls need to rest properly in preparation for the upcoming battle. Cabins for the crew are on the left and right sides of the corridor leaving the bridge. I'll unlock them now, so all of you can pick whichever cabin you prefer."
I focused my mind and opened the doors to the various cabins.
The Atlanteans were humans too, so all essential facilities were the same. Through the data in my mind, I verified the cabin layouts. They were equipped with beds and showers.
"Understood. So much happened last night and we did not get to sleep well. Let us take a quick nap to refresh ourselves."
Lisa nodded and left the bridge with the others. Only Mitsuki remained, staring at me.
"Nii-san... What are your plans?"
"I'll stay here. I can't relax too much if I'm controlling Marduk."
"I see—Then I will share a cabin with Iris-san. It would be best for me not to be alone."
With a disappointed look, Mitsuki left the bridge. Did she intend to have a word with me? I hesitated, wondering if I should chase after her, but it felt like I'd merely repeat last night's situation if I said anything—So I stayed in my seat.
Only three people remained in the bridge. Ren who was focused on analyzing Marduk's systems, Shinomiya-sensei who was currently contacting NIFL, and myself.
"....."
Even though I could not relax too much, there was nothing in particular for me to do at the moment. Having set up Marduk to fly towards the destination at a constant speed, all I needed to do was maintain the link.
No—Perhaps I could even take a nap.
The people piloting this Marduk in the past could not have worked nonstop without sleep or rest. However, piloting information was separate from the data on the ship's structure, so it was all unknown to me. Even though I could feel how to activate Marduk, I had no idea how the pilots regulated their own conditions.
That being said, attempting to take a nap would be too dangerous. All I could do was wait for Ren's analysis to finish then see if there was some kind of manual related to that.
I suppressed a natural yawn.

Having slept on a sofa last night, I would slip into drowsiness as soon as there was nothing to do. Auto-piloting had lessened my burden, causing my headache to gradually improve. I could very well fall asleep accidentally for real.
Ren and Shinomiya-sensei seemed quite busy, so I was reluctant to talk to them just for a change of pace.
My only choice was to look up at the domed ceiling, gazing at the clouds, rapidly flying past.
—What might Mitsuki and Iris be chatting about?
After spacing out for a while, this thought crossed my mind.
I had told Iris everything. Spending time alone with Mitsuki in these circumstances, she might possibly panic.
Suddenly at that moment, my vision turned blurry then within the blink of an eye, the view in front of me changed completely.
—Huh?
I saw one of the cabins I had opened up for the girls just now. Inside a narrow room meant for a single occupant, there was a bed, a table and a shower compartment. Iris was sitting on the bed while Mitsuki had her laptop open at the table.
"Iris-san, you should lie down. I have slept plenty enough, so let me first take care of some student council work that had been pushed back due to the festival yesterday."
"Mitsuki-chan, even now, you're still working hard at finishing your work as the student council president? You're so amazing..."
"Not really, I am simply using work to give myself a change of pace—"
I was able to listen to their conversation.
The view point was looking down at Iris and Mitsuki from near the ceiling.
But of course, I was not actually there and neither did they notice me.
—Were these images transmitted to me from Marduk?
I was currently linked to Marduk and through my senses, I was able to know the entire ship's state and method of operation.
Due to being in this state, that was probably why my curiosity about what was happening inside the ship had caused the relevant scenes to be visually projected into my mind. But in terms of the feeling, it was more like I had become an invisible ghost hovering in midair rather than merely viewing images.
This was totally voyeurism. I frantically tried to pull my consciousness back to reality but my thoughts halted when I heard something Iris said.
"Mitsuki-chan, is 'instinct' not acceptable for you?"
"Iris-san..."
Mitsuki stopped what she was doing and stared at Iris in surprise.
"Sorry... Mononobe told me."
"...Is that so?"
Iris apologized then Mitsuki bowed her head somewhat embarrassedly.

"U-Umm, this is what I think. Isn't instinct the source of all feelings, like being hungry, wanting to sleep, or liking someone? So if you say that's unacceptable, how should I put this…?"
The atmosphere grew more and more heavy as Iris continued anxiously. At this moment, Mitsuki smiled wryly and made a deep sigh.
"—Thank you for your encouragement, but this is not the same."
This was a very transparent but very sad smile.
"Not the same?"
"Indeed. Iris-san, of course I have already agonized over what you were talking about, but what makes me truly afraid is—"
Mitsuki simply bit her lip with a very pained expression and did not finish her sentence. Seeing the look on her face, Iris stood up from the bed and rushed over to her side.
"N-No more! I'm sorry, Mitsuki-chan, I don't know anything…"
—Mitsuki.
I didn't know either what was tormenting Mitsuki. I had no idea at all. How truly disgraceful.
"…Do not let it bother you. If you are going to take a nap, how about a shower first?"
Mitsuki shook her head and urged Iris as though trying to change the subject.
"Sure… Oh, in that case, we might as well shower together! Mitsuki-chan, you haven't had a bath since last night, have you?"
"I have not, but showering together should not be necessary…"
Mitsuki hesitated in the face of Iris' sudden suggestion, but Iris clenched her fist and insisted vigorously.
"It is! This is definitely more fun than work! If you're going for a change of pace, then fun is obviously the answer! Come, up up up you go! I'll help you undress."
Saying that, Iris helped Mitsuki up and untied the ribbon at her collar.
"W-Wait! I can do this by myself—"
Mitsuki was very surprised, but I was equally flustered.
Although it was bad to eavesdrop up to this point, watching the rest would be truly unforgivable.
I tried to turn my attention elsewhere, which hopefully would switch the video feed.
—Another room, anywhere but here…!
Pale skin came into view with the unfastening of buttons at the collar—Just as I tried my hardest to avert my gaze, the two of them disappeared from view.

However, I was still looking into a cabin on the ship. My consciousness was hovering near the ceiling and I could see Firill lying forward on the bed, reading a book.
"...Fufu."
Firill chuckled happily to herself while turning the pages.
It looked like my viewpoint had switched to Firill's cabin.
This was not good either. I should switch to either an unoccupied cabin or back to the bridge next.
I focused my mind, trying to switch my viewpoint to a place of my choosing.
However, Firill's kicking legs entered a corner of my view.
While reading, she was slowly kicking her legs up and down alternately.
With her socks taken off, her calves were making my heart race, but the thighs were even more dangerous.
Due to the movement of her legs, the hem of her skirt was lifted, almost exposing her underwear. No, if I changed the angle, perhaps I could—
—Hey, what the heck am I thinking!?
I came to my senses and suppressed inappropriate thoughts, forcibly moving my gaze away from Firill's thighs.
Next, the view changed again. Apparently, the thought of shifting my gaze away was the trigger to changing the viewpoint.
But the next one was still a cabin occupied by one of my companions.
Ariella was silently doing push-ups. Strength training, I guess.
In preparation for the imminent battle—That wasn't right. This kind of regular training had the effect of calming one's mind. I knew that all too well.
"Mmm... Hoo..."
Regular breathing noises. Sweat dripping from her brow. Heating up due to exercise, the hue of her skin looked even more seductive. I could not help but gulp.
However, just as I noticed Ariella switching from push-ups to a handstand posture, I panicked.
—H-Hey, if you go upside-down...
Just as her slender legs were about to point up to the ceiling and her skirt would flip over due to gravity, I mobilized my self-control completely and shifted my gaze.
Another change of viewpoint, but this time, I did not even get a chance to relax.
"Mama, cAn'T taKe oFf."
"Try harder, Zwei. If I always help you, then you will never learn how to unfasten your own buttons, you know?"
In the next cabin, Jeanne was watching Shion undress. Like Iris and Mitsuki, they were probably going to take a shower.
"...goT it. i'LL tRy mY BesT."
It brought a smile to one's face to see Shion doing her best to unfasten her buttons, but also made the viewer feel an urge to help her.

Jeanne must be feeling the same, she extended and retracted her hand repeatedly. In the process, she came up with an idea and hastily began to remove her uniform shirt.
"Look, Zwei. Follow what I am doing."
Saying that, Jeanne began to unbutton her shirt starting from the top.
—Hey!?
As each button was unfastened, more of her pale skin came into view, accompanied by wobbling of her bust that was tightly constrained by clothing.
After being told off by the girls previously, Jeanne stopped trying to hide the shape of her bust deliberately. However, a male uniform was still a bit too restrictive for her chest.
When the third button was undone, her cleavage became exposed and I could not help but find my gaze drawn to it.
"Uh... Like Mama..."
Shion was staring at the motions of Jeanne's hands for reference, but it was difficult for me to remain calm after watching Jeanne expose her feminine body.
—I've got to leave and switch to another room—
Using the same principle as before, I averted my gaze and consciousness. Before the next image appeared, a high-pitched voice sounded in my mind first.
"Ahh, 'tis enough! I have stated I do not need a bath!"
"No, Mother. Since you are currently unable to replace your body, you need to take proper care of your hair and skin."
A warzone of a cabin was projected into my mind. Dressed in a camisole, Vritra was running all over the place, trying to escape Kili who was trying to disrobe her by force.
"Be that as it may, I am capable of performing the task alone—"
"If I leave it to you, Mother, isn't that the same as not using shampoo?"
"It entereth mine eyes!"
One of Vritra's shoulder straps had loosened and she was running around the room in a less than presentable manner. In many ways, this was unsuitable for continued viewing. The black dragon—"Black" Vritra—Where has its fearsome aura gone off to?
—I'll pretend I never saw this.
Making my decision, I moved my gaze away from these mother-daughter interactions that brought a smile to my face.
The view switched and the two of them disappeared. This time, it was a cabin with an identical layout, but no one was there.
I sighed mentally. Finally, an unused cabin.
—Hmm?
Upon closer examination, I noticed a set of school uniform, properly folded on the bed, and there were faint water sounds and humming coming from the shower room.

"Why are you~~ always so~~ reckless~~♪"
The pitch and melody were not very accurate and the lyrics were probably improvised.
"I really wish~~ you could show some moderation~~ which is why I can't~~ leave you alone~~♪"
Did she feel inspired? The chorus part seemed to be sung in high spirits.
This voice—Lisa's. I could not be mistaken.
"Before I knew it, someone like you~~ has taken over an important position in my heart~~"
However, this was really embarrassing.
I had done something similar before, but singing in the shower was usually kept for occassions with no one else present. If someone heard me, I'd feel so embarrassed that I'd lock myself in the room for a while.
Just as I was feeling guilty, the water stopped and the shower room was opened.
My heart shook violently. Now I realized it was no time to be laid back.
White steam flowed into the room as Lisa emerged naked from the shower room—

—S-Sorry!
Although I knew she could not hear my voice, I still apologized on reflex and closed my eyes.
The sounds vanished instantly and I knew the scene had shifted again.
I slowly and carefully opened my eyelids—those of my consciousness rather than my real ones.
However, I could not see anything.
I was surrounded by white mist and there was the sound of running water.
—Where... is this?
Just as I muttered in my heart, the mist moved—Then came a loud voice.
"Oh—Yuu, what are you doing there?"
The water stopped and the mist thinned out a bit, then Tia's figure came into view.
Obscured by the mist was her naked body. Only then did I realize I was inside the shower room.
More surprisingly, Tia was looking up at me.
—T-Tia? You can see me?
No one so far had been able to notice me as a mental projection nor hear my thoughts. However, Tia nodded matter-of-factly. As Yggdrasil's successor, Tia's ability to interfere with "information" had probably allowed her to sense my consciousness that was synchronized with Marduk.
"Of course Tia can see you. Yuu... Did you come to peek on Tia?"
Tia blushed shyly and used her hands to cover her breasts and lower abdomen.
—No, I didn't do this on purpose! It's just that after linking with Marduk, images from inside the ship have flowed automatically into my mind—
"Images from inside the ship? So Yuu not only peeked on Tia but everyone else?"
—Urgh, well, although I didn't do it on purpose, that's what it ended up being...
Unable to refute her, I admitted it. After all, it was the indelible truth that I had peeked on everyone while they were unguarded.
"Yuu, peeking is bad. Even if it wasn't on purpose, you need to be punished for doing bad things."
Tia stared at me and spoke in Lisa's tone of voice.
—Fair point.
"So, come to Tia's cabin right away, Yuu, in your real body."
—F-Fine. But how do I switch my viewpoint back?
"Tia will help you."
A flash of electricity sparked across Tia's red horns. The blinding light made me closed my eyes. When I opened them again, I was already back in my seat in the bridge.
Ren and Shinomiya-sensei were working at their positions in front and did not seem to have noticed my consciousness moving away.

I was slightly unsteady when I stood up. There was a sharp pain throbbing in the depths of my head.
Including the fact that I could not control my viewpoint, it looked like I had yet to master Marduk's control.
Saying I was going over to Tia, I left the bridge.
Along the sides of the passage, illuminated with milky-white light, were a series of doors. These were the cabins the girls were using.
Which one was Tia's? Although I could find out immediately by searching the interior of Marduk through my senses, this could end up turning into "voyeurism" again. Just as I was hesitating, a door opened automatically as though it had read my mind.
I approached the cabin and peered inside from the entrance.
"...Tia?"
I called her name and got a response from the shower room.
"Yuu, come in."
It looked like it was Tia's cabin. I entered as instructed and the door closed automatically.
"Uh, sorry for just now. While you were showering..."
Somewhat embarrassed, I apologized to Tia.
"Tia is not angry, after all, you are Tia's husband... But doing bad things means you have to be punished. Tia will work hard too."
From behind the door to the shower room, I could hear Tia's voice not very clearly.
In the past, Lisa had punished Tia to cleanse her of her guilt. Tia was most likely recalling that scene, which was why she was imitating Lisa.
"—Got it. Then I'm counting on you."
When answering, I prepared myself to be punched.
"Then come over to this side."
"Huh...?"
This unexpected answer made my voice go off key. I asked in puzzlement:
"Wait, Tia, aren't you in the middle of a shower?"
"Yes. Which is why Yuu will help wash Tia's hair as punishment for peeking just now. Usually, Lisa does it... But today, we are in separate cabins."
"W-Wash your hair—"
"...You can't do it?"
Tia's question interrupted my attempt to refuse.
"I can—But speaking of which, why did you pick separate cabins from Lisa?"
I needed some time to adjust my mindset, so I asked her a question.
"Well..."
From Tia's whisper, I could hear hesitation and unease.
The weakness in her voice made me realize that perhaps the reason why Tia had called me to her cabin was not only to punish me.
Last night, Tia had extracted data on the seventh dragon from Yggdrasil's Akashic Record, but due to the sudden emergence of the Bahamut, we had not had time to ask her about the result.

"Sorry, I won't complain. I'll accept your punishment, Tia."
Deciding that now was the time to be by Tia's side, I started removing my uniform.
"...Yes!"
I heard a happy voice behind the door.
After undressing completely, I took the towel that was placed in front of the shower room and wrapped it around my waist, then nervously pushed the door open.
White steam flowed out of the shower room warmly while the sound of the shower echoed throughout the entire cabin. With her hands over her privates, Tia looked up at me, blushing intensely.
"...I-I'm coming in."
"Please enter..."
Tia nodded.
I closed the door after entering. The shower room was too cramped for two people, forcing me and Tia to be in close proximity. It felt like any movement would make us touch each other.
Still running, the shower poured water over my entire body below the chest. For Tia, this height was just right, but it was too low for me.
"Yuu... Can you wash my hair?"
Fidgeting, Tia looked up and inquired with her gaze.
"—Yeah. Could you turn around?"
Although the feminine fragrance filling the shower room was making my heart race, I still nodded while maintaining a serious face and used my palm to receive some shampoo.
Tia turned around obediently. In the process, her petite shoulder touched my abdomen, causing both of us to shudder.
I convinced myself this was punishment for peeking then reached towards her blonde hair that was almost pink.
Normally tied into twintails, her hair was let down and reached waist level. Indeed, washing it herself would be quite a hassle. I now understood why Lisa helped out.
"Then let's start."
I inserted my fingers between her hair near the top of her head, gently massaging her scalp while making suds with the shampoo.
"...Fufu, this tickles a bit."
Her shoulders trembling slightly, Tia laughed.
"Does it itch anywhere?"
I asked like an owner of a hair salon.
"No, Tia's hair is washed clean every day, so it doesn't itch."
After listening to her, I continued to wash her hair carefully, but whenever my fingertips touched the red horns, Tia's voice got shrill and excited.
"Hyah!? Y-Yuu, don't touch the horns suddenly! They're very sensitive!"
Tearfully, Tia looked back and glared at me.
"Oh—I see, sorry. Then should I avoid the horns?"

"...Don't worry. Tia hopes Yuu can wash the horns clean too. As long as you're gentle... It's fine."
Making her decision, she turned her back to me again.
"Got it. Then I'll be more gentle—"
I gathered suds on my fingertips and touched Tia's red horns gently.
"Mm... Ah—"
Tia trembled and moaned, but this time, I went with the flow and continued without stopping.
"Does it tickle?"
"Oohh... I-It's okay—Ahmm... Ya... Mm..."
Tia's sweet voice echoed in the shower room, rocking my sanity greatly. I focused my mind on my fingertips to banish unnecessary thoughts.
I used the inner side of my fingers to gently rub the smooth and shiny surface of the horns while controlling my strength to scrub the interface between the scalp and the horns.
"Oh... Th-That part... Yuu... This feels so nice... Mm—"
Tia moaned in ecstasy, looking like she had gotten used to this stimulation. Her body also relaxed greatly.
It seemed that rubbing the base of the horns was quite pleasurable so I focused on cleaning it for a while. Then I combed her long hair with my fingers and carefully washed all the way to the tips. Finally, I washed off the suds and applied conditioner before rinsing with hot water—Thus I completed the punishment Tia had given me.
"Okay, it's done."
"—Tia's mind feels blank."
With blushing cheeks, Tia turned her head back then rested it against my body.
"Tia, are you okay?"
I bent down and caught Tia with my hands as she leaned back. Her petite body was warm and soft. Although there were suds lingering on her body, washed from her hair, it was not enough to cover her pale, nude body. I really had no idea where I should direct my gaze.
"...So weird. Just a shower, yet it feels like Tia soaked too long in a bath."
Tia murmured in puzzlement.
"Then let's get out soon."
I switched off the shower and was going to pick up the limp Tia in my arms, but she frantically grabbed my arm forcefully.
"Oh—Wait! Tia still wants to stay here with Yuu longer."
"W-Why?"
I did not understand so I asked for the reason. Her face all red, Tia spoke:
"...It's cramped, here... If it's here... Being close to Yuu won't be strange... Not because Tia is weak..."
Tia squeezed out these words before wrapping her arms around my neck.
"Uh—"

Direct contact with tender skin made my heart jump, but I calmed down after noticing Tia's trembling.
When I asked why she had picked separate cabins with Lisa, she had acted strangely.
"...Did something happen?"
I controlled my emotions and asked in a gentle tone of voice. At the same time, I moved my hand to the back of Tia's petite back and gently patted her to soothe her.
"Yuu... Tia... did as Vritra suggested, to search the memories of Yggdrasil's predecessor—'Verdant' Kiskanu—about the seventh dragon."
Hugging me tightly, Tia whispered in my ear.
"Then you saw something scary?"
Holding her delicate and young body, I inquired, but she denied it.
"No... Nothing could be seen, total darkness."
"Total darkness?"
"Something black was spreading throughout the Earth—devouring forests and grasslands... Kiskanu became unable to think. Due to the excessive loss of plant life, not enough computational power was left. So almost no analysis and recording could be done."
Then Tia paused, hugging me tighter.
"...So scary. 'Death'... turns out to be so painful, so sad... So lonely... Tia never knew."
Hearing this, I understood why Tia was trembling.
Digging through Kiskanu's memories, Tia had experienced "death."
I had also stood on the brink of the abyss of death, but in my case, there was still a chance to return. It was impossible for me to imagine true death.
"You worked really hard."
Consolation did not seem right, so I chose to praise her effort instead.
"Yes, Tia... worked really hard. But Tia needs to continue working... continue thinking."
Tia nodded lightly then moved her body away slightly. With our noses almost touching, she looked at me squarely.
"Thinking?"
"After destroying the world, where exactly did the seventh dragon go... That pitch-black darkness—what Kiskanu called 'end matter'—what is it exactly...? Why Bahamut reappeared now of all times.. Tia must think to find answers. This is a job that only Tia can do by using Yggdrasil's Akashic Record."
Tia finished with determination but her body was still trembling a bit.
"You're not overdoing it, are you?"
"...A bit. Tia actually wants to go to Lisa and hug her tight. Lisa is so kind and will definitely ask Tia to stop straining. But... That won't do."
So this was her reason for picking a separate cabin from Lisa, huh?
Saying she was not weak earlier was definitely just putting on a brave face.
"Will you be able to hang in there?"

"Yes—Leaning close to Yuu, Tia feels warm... It's fine now. For the husband, the wife will work hard!"
With scarlet cheeks, Tia made dazzing smile. These words came from the heart instead of putting on a strong front.
Hearing these words filled with intense affection while locked in a nude embrace, I was starting to feel my cheeks heat up.
"Yuu..."
Tia drew her face near and the tips of our noses happened to touch. Then slightly shyly, she smiled. A sweet atmosphere filled the entirety of the cramped shower room and I could feel each other's heartbeats speeding up.
At that very moment, the light in the shower room suddenly flickered.
Just as Tia and I looked up in surprise, the shower suddenly poured out a lot of cold water.
"—So cold—!?"
"Kyah!? Cold!"
As we screamed, the water flow from the showerhead increased further, even causing it to fall from the hook and jump all over the place.
"Ouch!"
The jumping showerhead struck me in the forehead, making me see stars.
"Y-Yuu! Hurry and turn off the shower!"
"Yeah—But I'm pretty sure I turned it off just now—"
While dodging the showerhead that was rampaging like a snake, I adjusted the water flow and temperature.
However, the shower flow did not decrease. Smashing into the wall, it continued to spew cold water.
"Ooh... So cold."
Clinging to my back, Tia avoided the shower. The mild bulge of her bosom and tender skin was making my heart race, but this arousal was instantly put out by the water.
"...L-Let's leave first."
I gave up on shutting off the shower. Carrying Tia in one arm, I walked out of the shower room.
But in the process, I shuddered from the cold.
"S-So cold again."
Huddled in a ball, Tia commented on the cabin's condition.
Yes—The cabin's temperature was abnormally low. Did the air-conditioning malfunction? It was blowing cold air at maximum output.
The coldness seeped into my wet body, causing my teeth to chatter. I put down Tia then immediately operated the panel to control the air-conditioner, but like the shower, it did not respond.
"Yuu, the door can't open either!"
Unable to bear to cold, Tia slammed her hands against the door to the corridor and cried out anxiously.
"Could it be that... Marduk has gone out of control?"

I focused my mind and increased my synchronization with Marduk. Then I tried to use my mind directly to operate the cabin's functions.
However—I failed to convey my thoughts to the cabin facilities. It felt like something was blocking the transmission of my commands.
Next, the ship's operating system seemed to show abnormalities. The ship's body also shook heavily once.
"Sorry, Tia, it looks like I can't control Marduk. In truth, my head has been hurting and I thought I could keep it under control..."
"Got it. Then Tia will try interfering with the systems."
Tia nodded and closed her eyes to focus her mind. Electrical sparks erupted from her red horns. However, the air-conditioning did not stop and the door remained locked.
"—Something is in the way."
Tia showed a surprised look then turned her head to sweep her gaze around the room. Finally, her gaze settled on the ceiling near the air-conditioner.
"Yuu, look! Something's there!"
"...Where?"
Despite looking in the direction Tia indicated, I still could not see.
"Just like when you were peeping, Yuu, it can't be seen normally."
After hearing that, I tried using "Marduk's viewpoint" to get a grasp on the cabin situation.
I concentrated and synchronized myself with Marduk further. From overhead, I observed this room—
Then I noticed a tiny glowing dot flitting about in the cabin.
However, the glowing dot immediately vanished after leaving a bright trail.
"It noticed that we discovered it and hid. Something must have invaded Marduk's system, so it's not Yuu's fault."
Saying that, Tia quickly dried herself and put on her uniform. I picked up my clothes while trying not to look in her direction and asked:
"Invaded the system... But this is a pre-civilization weapon filled with lost technology, right? Is that even possible?"
"But it's true we've been hacked. We'll know once the culprit is caught. But it's hard unless Tia goes all-out... Yuu, you might feel numb... Okay?"
Tia asked hesitantly.
"Yeah, no problem. Go ahead."
Since I could not do anything, relying on Tia was the only way.
"Got it. Okay, electronic warfare—Begin."
Tia had already put on her clothes. A blinding flash of electricity was released from her horns. The electricity zapped throughout the cramped cabin. I guarded my face with my arms and held my breath. My physical body took almost no damage but the feeling of being synchronized to Marduk was numbed for an instant.
This was evidence that Tia's interference had spread throughout the ship. Most likely, Tia had held back earlier to avoid affecting my link with

Marduk. The numbing feeling probably referred sensations on Marduk's side.
After subduing Yggdrasil, Tia had gained the power that Kiskanu had used to destroy "Ultimate Wisdom" Atlantis. This authority allowed her to control electromagnetism and dominate all kinds of "electronic information."
A forcible search through the systems of Marduk, an Atlantean weapon, would be a piece of cake for Tia.
The cabin's illumination flickered and went out.
When it brightened again, the air-conditioner stopped blowing cold air and I could hear that the water in the shower room had stopped.
"—Control over this cabin has been seized back. Yuu, if something doesn't feel right in the ship, tell Tia."
Having dressed, I nodded then checked Marduk's state as though examining my own body.
Marduk's numbed feeling, due to Tia's interference, was gradually recovering. Although a bit of numbness remained, preventing precise operation of the ship's facilities, finding irregularities was still doable.
"Considering the shaking earlier, something must be wrong with the drive system—Main mechanism normal. Others... Hmm? There's something off about the gravitational control device on the left main wing."
"Got it. It must be there!"
Tia nodded and her horns released a flash of electricity.
The blinding light made me narrow my eyes while watching her fight. I could not imagine what kind of battle was taking place inside the system.
Marduk's senses were also showing localized paralysis and numbing, which told me where the electronic warfare was taking place—but I could not get a grasp on further details.
"—Cornered."
After a while, Tia smiled victoriously and held my hand.
"Yuu, go to the bridge! The culprit is over there!"
Pulling me, she walked towards the doorway and the door opened automatically.
"By over there, you mean—"
Before I understood the situation, I went with Tia to run along the corridor to the bridge.
After the door to the bridge opened, we stepped into the domed room.
Shinomiya-sensei and Ren were looking up at the monitor that was filled with static.
"W-What happened? Did I press a wrong button?"
"...Doubt it. Calm down. Probably a virus or something."
Ren comforted the flustered Shinomiya-sensei. The omnidirectional monitor originally displaying optical images from outside was not only showing static but also had countless small vine-like images, crawling over the screen.
"Look, I'll catch it soon."

Tia pointed up.
I looked closely and saw a glowing ball moving rapidly on the screen, roughly the size of a baseball. The vines were chasing it.
Finally cornered, the glowing ball was entangled by the vines.
"This rubbish tree! Unhand me!"
Then a high-pitched voice sounded throughout the bridge.
The glowing sphere gradually dimmed and the true appearance of what the vines had caught was displayed on the monitor. It was a very petite girl with transparent wings sprouting from her back. Based on the displayed size, her height was around twenty centimeters.
"...A fairy?"
Ren remarked in a whisper.
Judging from the girl's height and appearance, it was quite normal to think of this description first.
"In any case, what is the current situation?"
Unable to hide the doubt on her face, Shinomiya-sensei wanted us to explain further. Tia replied:
"The virus invading Marduk and the vaccine program Tia created are being visualized on the monitor. The fairy-like thing is the virus and the vines comprise the vaccine."
"Who are you calling a virus! I am the ultimate machine intellect, created by supreme wisdom!"
The tiny fairy instantly retorted, struggling furiously to escape the vines restraining her. However, the vines showed no signs of releasing her.
"Machine intellect...? You mean AI?"
As soon as I asked my question, the fairy glared at me.
"Do not compare me to primitive artificial intelligence! I am not something created by humans! The wisdom of Atlantis was achieved through continual self-evolution of collective machines—As such, I ought to be called machine intellect, not artificial intelligence! How dare you call me a virus, that would be an insult of the most awful and most atrocious nature... Isn't the rubbish tree that destroyed my civilization an even more deplorable virus!?"
The fairy vented in a vigorous diatribe. While her voice sounded in my mind, there was information that could not be ignored.
"What... Atlantis? What rubbish tree... Don't tell me you're referring to Tia—no, Yggdrasil?"
Seeing the fairy glare at Tia with hatred, I asked cautiously, but an unexpected source gave the reply.
'Precisely, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe. She hates Yggdrasil with a passion—or what used to be known as Kiskanu, I suppose. After all, it was the mortal enemy that wiped out Atlantean civilization completely.'

"—"
I followed the sudden sound source, which was coming from where Shinomiya-sensei was sitting, but it was not her voice. In front of her seat, there was a square window on the monitor—A man with slender eyes was smiling.
'Furthermore, she suffered during the battle last time. The firing of the battleship *Naglfar*'s cannon was interrupted due its system getting hacked. Let it be... It was my mistake for failing to take into account that the other side possessed the holder of Yggdrasil's authority.'
"Major Loki..."
I muttered the name of the man who was smiling wryly.
He used to be my superior officer. In addition, we were opponents who had put everything on the line to kill each other. Furthermore, I had killed him with these hands of mine. Although Kili had used biogenic transmutation to save his life afterwards... The sensation of taking a life still lingered on my hands.
'Hmph... You look like you've seen a ghost, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe. You can't possibly be unaware that I am alive, right?'
"I knew, but it still feels strange..."
With mixed feelings of guilt and relief, I nodded.
'Me too. Being able to see the face of one's murderer must be a rare experience. However, let us put this topic aside for now. Could you release her first? It appears that she entered your ship through the communications channel while Colonel Shinomiya and I were having a strategy discussion.'
Major Loki pointed at the screen and spoke. Although the direction was off, he was presumably referring to the fairy caught in the vines.
"Well, even if you tell me to release her..."
Slightly troubled, I exchanged eye contact with Tia beside me for a moment.
Major Loki smiled.
'Relax. She won't take any action that would cause critical harm to any of you. She is well aware that your participation is necessary for the upcoming operation. It was merely mischief to give you a headache, that's all. Am I right, Atla?
Hearing this, the fairy restrained by the vines nodded glumly.
"Precisely. Seeing the rubbish tree messing with *my* Marduk, I could not hold myself back momentarily and merely sought revenge... I am terribly sorry for ending up in an embarrassing position again."
She apologized honestly, making her earlier fury seem like a lie. After hearing that, Major Loki smiled at us and said:
'—So there you have it. Even with lingering hatred, she is not your enemy. Rather, it would be better to consider her a friend currently.'
Major Loki shrugged lightly and told us not to worry.
After listening to this conversation, Shinomiya-sensei sighed mildly and looked at us.

"Release that fairy-esque being. Next, we will be fighting alongside NIFL, so trust them for the time being. However, Major Loki, you are obliged to give us a proper explanation."
I complied with Shinomiya-sensei's instructions and had Tia release the vines.
"Hmph, phooey."
Regaining her freedom, the fairy made a face at us then flew back to Major Loki's side.
"Hmm... She didn't repent at all."
"Let's listen to his explanation first."
Tia pouted unhappily so I patted her on the head to appease her.
"Mm, machine intellect... Fascinating. From what she said earlier, it sounds like she's related to the civilization of Atlantis..."
Ren's eyes were glimmering with curiosity, urging Major Loki to start explaining. Then smiling suggestively, he began to recount.
'Rather than related to Atlantis, it's better to say she *is* Atlantis. The supreme machine intellect managing and running the lost civilization... Its name was Atlantis. She—Atla—was born from its restoration.'
"Yes, I am precisely 'Ultimate Wisdom' Atlantis!"
Moving inside the window that showed Major Loki, the fairy puffed out her chest proudly.
However, that childish behavior left us with visible doubt on our faces.
"Supreme machine intellect..."
Even said out loud, it did not feel real. Tia frowned and did not seem convinced.
"Doesn't look that amazing."
"Mm, too young for an AI that managed a civilization."
Ren agreed too. The fairy—Atla—went bright red in the face.
"How rude! Whether organic or inorganic, there exists no intellect higher than mine!"
Major Loki apparently saw Atla's furious image too and he said with a wry smile:
'—Atla is undoubtedly a very advanced intellectual entity. However, what we managed to restore was only her core. Due to damage and loss in the storage medium, memory data—the archives of Atlantis—have become incomplete. As a result, the avatar's behavior became a little cute... But her true identity is indisputably the "god of the old world." It would be best not to underestimate her.'
Although Major Loki covered for Atla, she was whispering "M-Master... calling me cute..." while twisting her body. The claim that she was "the god of the old world" was not convincing at all.
Unlike Ren, Shinomiya-sensei and I who were rendered speechless by Atla's words and behavior, only Tia showed an expression of extreme surprise.
"Storage medium—How could anything like that be left behind!? Kiskanu should've wiped out all electronic data when destroying Atlantis."

Tia asserted strongly. Yggdrasil's Akashic Record must have retained related records.
However, the confidence in Major Loki's smile did not decrease the slightest despite Tia's objections.
'What we unearthed were not magnetic storage devices but only stone tablets.'
"...Stone tablets?"
Tia frowned in surprise.
'Due to the destruction wrought by dragon disasters, a site containing Atlantean ruins was found by chance and fell under secret management by Asgard and NIFL. Preserved in the ruins were a vast number of stone tablets stacked many layers deep. A language consisting of two symbols was carved on the surface of these stone tablets.
Hearing this, Ren spoke in comprehension.
"Two symbols... Could it be binary...? They used stone tablets to record electronic data?"
'Precisely. Most likely, Atlantis used durable media to leave behind data, believing future humans would be able to revive civilization. Since the storage medium involves neither magnetic fields nor electrical voltages, it is immune to destruction by electromagnetic interference. Of course, reading it is a challenge and it took us many long years to finally complete the data extraction. This allowed us to revive the machine intellect, which used to govern the Atlantis civilization, in the modern age.'
Although Major Loki sounded proud in his reply, I could see an element of self-deprecation in his smile.
'—That being said, there are limits as to what modern science and technology can accomplish. Through continued research and enlisting Atla's power, we finally finished an imitation of Marduk—this battleship *Naglfar*—but it is far inferior to the genuine article you have there.'
Major Loki had just said that it was the battleship *Naglfar* that had fired its cannon at Midgard. Equipped with a weapon similar to Babel, it was apparently Marduk's imitation.
"Major Loki, by saying 'this battleship,' does that mean you are currently on board the *Naglfar*?"
Major Loki nodded.
'Yes, I am standing by at the first defense line, aboard this Atlantean weapon that has just been revealed to the public. We are currently in a state of severe shortage in combat potential, so your side's participation is very heartening.'
Despite the goodwill in Major Loki's words, Atla suddenly interjected.
"Master, I believe we should take over Marduk after the rendezvous."
"What are you suddenly saying...?"
The sudden suggestion caused an uproar in Marduk's bridge.
However, Atla ignored our concerns and continued speaking to Major Loki.

"After entering the ship, I discovered that they are still unable to operate the ship well. At this rate, they are merely going to waste a treasure. I dare assert, only the King of Atlantis approved by me—you, Master—has the right to use Deus Dragon!"
'Hmph... Unable to operate the ship well? Is that true, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe?'
"....."
His sharp gaze put me at a loss for words.
'It appears that the allegations are true. However... Be that as it may, I currently do not have the authority to requisition Marduk. Still I must ask, do you have any plans to ameliorate this situation?'
Confronted with his words and gaze, testing me, my body became a bit stiff. However, realizing the risk of Major Loki seizing command of this operation at this rate, I replied assertively.
"The strain of operating the ship was higher than expected. This is the truth. However, there has been no clear signs of malfunction so far, until she—Atla—wrought her mischief."
I stared at Atla, who had forced her way into Major Loki's window, and she immediately launched a rebuttal.
"One person barely keeping things under control is limited to the current situation of normal cruising. The strain will multiply several fold when battle mode is entered. Your little brain is going to burst immediately."
Atla asserted with certainty. Then Tia pouted and glared at her.
"Tia will help if Yuu is in trouble. If it's possible to operate Marduk better, Atla can simply reveal the correct method."
"Hmph, like anyone would tell a rubbish tree."
Atla turned her face away viciously. However, Major Loki seemed to agree with Tia's opinion and nodded solemnly.
'...Fair point. Atla, if you know where the problem lies, instruct them on how to control Marduk.'
"N-No way!? If you were to pilot Marduk, Master, surely—"
Atla looked very flustered, but Major Loki shook his head and interrupted her objections.
'Atla, Marduk is not the key to this operation. Atlantean weapons are effective against Bahamut to some extent, but cannot deliver a decisive blow. As such, it does not matter who is actually piloting.'
"Muu... Understood."
Atla agreed reluctantly. However, I was more concerned by what Major Loki's words implied.
"Cannot deliver a decisive blow... How did you know that?"
'Rather than asking me, you should be asking the one connected to Yggdrasil.'
Major Loki motioned to Tia beside me.
"...Ask Tia?"

'Yes, after all, our—Atla's—analysis was based on the data salvaged from the remains of Yggdrasil scattered at Fuji's Sea of Trees.'
Hearing that they had done that secretly, I shifted my surprised gaze to Tia.
"Yes... If what appeared this time is truly Bahamut, then Marduk... No, any weapon will not be able to destroy it completely. Only Basilisk's authority —'Catastrophe'—is capable of destroying it."
Seeing Tia agree with his viewpoint, Loki nodded.
'Indeed, Atla also reached the same conclusion, which is why we sought Midgard's assistance. We know that the D targeted by Leviathan in the past, Iris Freyja, is able to use Catastrophe, though the official report only arrived just now.'
Major Loki's smiled was mixed with irony. Then he continued:
'Hence, she is the main star this time. The ship carrying her must not come to any harm. Consequently, Atla, I shall be counting on you, alright?'
Warned in this manner, Atla nodded unhappily and glared at me.
"You leave me no choice... I shall not repeat myself. Listen carefully, got that?"
"Yeah."
Seeing me nod, Atla raised two fingers of her right hand.
"Marduk's control requires at least two people as linkers. If you take charge of piloting and weapons control, leaving the enemy detection system and the rest of the functions to someone else, the problem of excessive strain should be solved."
Atla spoke very rapidly, as though trying to finish a hated job as quickly as possible. However, I noticed an unfamiliar term.
"Linker?"
"...Stop asking questions. Did I not say that I shall not repeat myself?"
"No, it'll be a problem if I don't immediately clear up the parts I don't get."
Seeing me demand an explanation, Atla sighed with displeasure.
"Pick this sort of thing up from context, will you? A linker is a pilot who performs a mental link with Marduk—Currently, this means you."
"It's true I'm synchronized with Marduk... But how do I link another person's mind with the ship's systems?"
My mind was automatically linked through the process of constructing Marduk. Although Tia could take control through hacking, we still did not know the proper means of linking to the ship.
"Good grief, asking this and that... Since Marduk's control authority lies in your hands, simply issue the order to the system through thoughts or speech and it would allow others to perform a mental link with the system."
Atla finished impatiently then flew into the background of the monitor that was showing Major Loki. Major Loki smiled wryly and shrugged.
'—So there you have it, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe. Unfortunately, the *Naglfar* does not make use of the mental link system. I cannot sympathize with your pain, but if you need a co-pilot, Jeanne Hortensia would be a candidate. She should be in your company, right?'

"Yes, but why Jeanne?"
Seeing me ask with a frown, Major Loki smiled profoundly.
'Soldiers of Atlantis all had their bodies modified on the genetic level according to their responsibilities, thereby optimizing their abilities as much as possible. In the modern world, most people with outstanding talents are their descendants. In other words, the members of Sleipnir, which one could consider a gathering of such people, should exhibit relatively good compatibility with Atlantean weapons.'
A quiet comment from Vritra suddenly surfaced in my mind.
She had said that people possessing exceptional abilities do not exist without reason—Jeanne's natural talent was possibly inherited from the Atlanteans.
"Major Loki, you assembled Sleipnir not only to conduct experiments related to Code Lost but also with the idea of using Atlantean weapons?"
Wondering how many steps Major Loki had thought ahead, I asked.
However, he shook his head wryly.
'Now that would be overthinking things. First of all, powerful weaponry is not needed if one possessed Code Lost. At least from the perspective of killing humans.'
I thought back to how terrifying it was to use Code Lost in its full form, capable of killing people with just a thought, and a chill ran down my spine.
Furthermore, there was a cold glint in Major Loki's eyes that caused my instincts to sound an alarm.
During the battle revolving around Code Lost, I emerged victorious over Major Loki in the end and thwarted the plan to kill Charlotte. However, he never showed a loser's attitude when interacting with me.
"Is that so...?"
Although we were currently allies, I warned myself not to lower my guard while nodding somewhat stiffly. At this moment, Major Loki slowly leaned forward to the screen.
'Hmm, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe, your tone was so stiff just now. I remember you sounded much more casual during our fight.'
"Huh?"
Pointing this out unexpectedly, he caused my voice to go off pitch slightly.
Indeed, during my fight against Major Loki, I had intentionally avoided using polite language—
"Oh—Well, back then, we were enemies."
'In other words, I am currently your superior on the same side, which is why you are taking such a rigid attitude? Then that is truly a shame. I was hoping to have a candid conversation with you...'
He sighed in disappointment. I did not know how serious he was.
"...Then don't make me your enemy, okay?"
I retorted sarcastically, prompting the corners of Major Loki's lips to twist in a grin.

'At least for this operation, we are allies. Don't worry, I won't stab you in the back. Of course, I will tell Atla the same.'
"Sounds like it will be scary after the operation."
'Really? But I am really looking forward to it.'
Major Loki smiled fearlessly then turned his gaze to Shinomiya-sensei.
'—Well then, Colonel Shinomiya, for the operation's success, let us have a detailed discussion. 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe, kindly find a good partner before the operation begins.'
"Very well—I will take the mentioned advice for reference."
I nodded and breathed a heavy sigh of relief. Sure enough, talking to Major Loki was very tiring.
I moved my gaze away from Major Loki who had started his discussion with Shinomiya-sensei and talked to Tia.
"Tia, to prevent Atla's mischief, watch over here for now. I'll go find Jeanne first."
"Yes, okay, leave it to Tia!"
Tia nodded and Ren also turned her head back from the console.
"Mm, I'll monitor the system too."
"Great, thanks a lot."
I left the scene to those two and exited the bridge.
Although I was reluctant to obey Major Loki, from the perspective of using the right person for the right job, there was no better candidate than Jeanne.
However, the problem was—
I recalled the scene of Jeanne unbuttoning her shirt and exposing her cleavage.
After peeking at that kind of scene, to be honest, I was not confident whether I could still look her in the eye.

Part 2

"Designate target—Jeanne Hortensia—as additional linker. Transfer control over the domains of enemy detection, communications, and information processing. However, forbid readings from occupied cabins. This applies to me as well."
I raised my hand over Jeanne's head while she was standing nervously close by and ordered Marduk verbally.
Having just taken a shower, Jeanne's face was flushed red, this combined with her moist hair was quite sexy. Although she was dressed in the male school uniform, the bulge of her chest and the after-shower fragrance were all conspiring to keep me strongly conscious of her identity as a woman.
The sight of her in underwear earlier was surfacing vaguely in my mind, so I concentrated while mentally repeating the words I was speaking.
The final command was to prevent Jeanne and I from peeking into other people's cabins. Now what happened earlier could be averted.
"—"
The illumination in the room blinked strongly once and Jeanne shuddered.
Watching her from the side, Shion asked worriedly, "Mama, aRe YoU oKaY?"
"—Yes, I am fine."
Jeanne smiled and reassured Shion then exclaimed.
"Captain... This is amazing. Through Marduk's various sensors, I can capture an endless stream of information—It is like my vision field expanded several hundred fold..."
"Does it hurt?"
Noticing that my own headache was subsiding, I asked how Jeanne felt.
Although I had succeeded in making Jeanne the second linker, she might not be able to bear the strain.
"No problem. Although the volume of information increased greatly... There isn't any fundamental change. To begin with, my eyes have always been able to see things other people could not."
I could not help but feel in awe. Although I knew Jeanne had an extraordinary pair of eyes, I never imagined it would allow her to acquire information on par with Marduk's sensors in quality. Jeanne most likely had eyes that could capture wavelengths beyond the visible spectrum and a brain capable of processing all this information.

Soldiers of Atlantis whose abilities were fully optimized for their responsibilities—Perhaps Jeanne really was one of their descendants.
"Really, then cooperate with me from now on. Jeanne, are you able to transmit information from arbitrary coordinates to me?"
"—Let me try. There is a small island fifty kilometers or so ahead. I will mark it."
Jeanne nodded and I was informed of the coordinates of the aforementioned island. With this, I could get a lock on distant enemies to attack.
However, I suddenly noticed that Jeanne's face in front of me had grown even redder.
"Hey, are you okay? Is it making you feel unwell after all—"
I frantically asked about her condition, but Jeanne suddenly came to her senses and shook her head.
"N-No! I am completely fine. It is just that..."
Mid-sentence, she looked down awkwardly for some reason.
"Just that?"
"Umm... It is like our minds are connected, Captain... It somehow fills me with joy... And elevated my temperature a little."
Jeanne explained the reason somewhat bashfully then looked up at me.
This girly behavior made my heart race. I barely maintained composure and nodded.
"I'm glad it's not making you feel unwell. However, tell me immediately if anything feels off."
"Yes, understood. I will not overextend myself and cause you trouble, Captain. Oh—"
Jeanne nodded at me then suddenly gasped and looked into the distance.
"Mama?"
Shion called out to Jeanne in puzzlement and Jeanne looked at us stiffly.
"What happened?"
"...Well, just now—through information sharing with NIFL, data was obtained from the Akashic Record... I found out details about the Bahamut situation, and the Earth's current state..."
She did not continue, at a loss for words.
"Is the situation that bad?"
Noticing the heavy atmosphere, I asked hesitantly.
"...Yes. Shinomiya-sensei should be explaining later, but Bahamut is a monster beyond imagination. Let me link my senses with yours, Captain."
As soon as Jeanne spoke, an image of Bahamut appeared in my mind. Its gigantic body was blotting out the sky and the sun, still reminiscent of Vritra. The shadow falling upon the ground turned into an unknown territory, impossible to probe or observe, and kept expanding to follow Bahamut's movement. Outside of the shadow was pure whiteness in stark contrast—A world of silver-white.
"The ground is completely covered by—ice? Has Bahamut reached the Arctic Circle?"

If that were the case, Bahamut's speed was faster than expected. I panicked a little, but Jeanne shook her head.
"No, not yet. What you are seeing now was originally a flowing ocean... However, the temperature around Bahamut is extremely low, causing even the ocean to freeze."
"Freezing... Is this Bahamut's ability?"
"Not exactly. The cold is at most a side effect. The true nature of its ability is the absorption of thermal energy. Bahamut is a creature that devours heat. Taking in heat from the surroundings, it grows, regenerates, and evolves. So long as there exists external thermal energy, it would be no exaggeration to call it immortal."
Jeanne's explanation made my forehead break out in cold sweat.
"Devouring heat... What a crazy ability. Then explosions and lasers will all become its food?"
"Yes. Precisely because of that, only Catastrophe is capable of defeating Bahamut. Its immortality is achieved through absorbing heat to fuel its metabolism whereas Catastrophe fast forwards time from the present point. When time goes by before Bahamut's cells can absorb energy for their metabolism, it results in apoptosis."
"So that's how Basilisk defeated Bahamut... No wait, since Bahamut reappeared, doesn't that mean it was never exterminated to begin with?"
When I voiced my doubt, Jeanne shook her head somewhat hesitantly.
"No—Had it not been exterminated, Bahamut would have absorbed all heat from the ground, turning Earth into a dead planet. It must have been completely annihilated at one point. However... I do not think the present Bahamut is fake either. Left unchecked, Bahamut will kill our planet, although at the present stage, the unknown territories are causing greater damage..."
"They've grown that big?"
I gulped and asked.
"The unknown territories mentioned before are black domes, and according to Marduk's sensors, there are a total of four great holes of 'nothing at all'— It might be better to describe the Earth as having four pieces gouged out of it."
Jeanne paused then sighed heavily.
"In particular, the unknown territories on the American west coast and the northern African continent have swallowed up areas of high population density. The number of victims has probably reached the tens of millions..."
"Hold on, it's too early to say that the people inside the unknown territories are dead. There must be a way to save them."
Just like how Mitsuki and I had survived inside the darkness—
After I said that with this hope in mind, Jeanne held her breath momentarily.
"—You are right, Captain. I have erred... I jumped to conclusions accidentally. Since responsibility for enemy detection and information

processing has been passed to me, I should strive for correct judgment—I am truly ashamed."
Jeanne cringed and bowed her head apologetically.
"No, it's necessary to prepare for the worst too. But at the same time, it's better to keep the ideal outcome in mind. Otherwise, you could end up losing your goal."
I recalled my days as her captain and gently patted her on the head.
"...Yes."
Jeanne nodded, still looking down.
"Papa, wHat iS iDeaL?"
Shion tugged at my clothing from the side.
"It means the best-case result. First we defeat Bahamut then we find a way to take care of the unknown territories—the darkness—and save all the people who were swallowed. Then we return to Midgard safe and sound. That's the ideal outcome."
Of course, the darkness inside Mitsuki also needed to be eliminated. Once I figured out the blue light capable of suppressing "end matter"—Neun's authority—and could use it skillfully, perhaps I would find a solution that was currently out of sight.
"Oh, iDeaL, aWEsoMe!"
Shion sounded impressed and smiled happily.
Seeing her face, I smiled naturally too, but a sliver of unease flashed through my mind.
—But was this truly the ideal outcome?
For some reason, this thought surfaced, There should not be any outcome more ideal than what I had just outlined.
But somehow, I had an uncomfortable feeling as though I had overlooked something.
I persuaded myself that I was overthinking things, but still could not erase the unease adhering to my heart.

Part 3

"—This is all the information we have confirmed regarding Bahamut. Although the trait of heat absorption is quite challenging, there is no need for excess panic since we know that Catastrophe can defeat it. Now, we will proceed with the details of the operation."
After sweeping her gaze across each and every one of us, gathered at the bridge, Shinomiya-sensei spoke with a grave expression. Having heard the content from Jeanne earlier, I was not surprised, but the girls' expressions were relatively stiff upon learning Bahamut's ability for the first time.
"Approximately thirty minutes from now, NIFL's fleet including the *Naglfar* will start engaging Bahamut. However, we will not be joining the defense line. Instead, we will launch a heavy assault from behind after the fighting begins. In other words, NIFL will take on the role as bait."
The screen behind her no displayed Major Loki's face. The omni-directional monitor was filled with the color of the sky with sunlight shining from above.
"The success of this operation depends on whether we can get Catastrophe to strike the target directly. Hence, we will rely on your powers as Ds and Marduk's equipment to open a path, to get as close to Bahamut as possible for Iris Freyja to fire Catastrophe. You are the key—We are counting on you."
"Y-Yes! I will do my best!"
Iris saluted and answered in a slightly shrill voice under Shinomiya-sensei's gaze.
"Mononobe Yuu and Jeanne Hortensia will confirm Bahamut's present location while adjusting the ship's speed. Until NIFL launches their attack, do not make a move under any condition."
"Understood."
"Affirmative."
Jeanne and I expressed acknowledgement and Shinomiya-sensei continued to issue orders to the rest.
"Lisa Highwalker and Firill Crest will remain outside the ship to guard the starboard. Ariella Lu and Ren Miyazawa will be in charge of the port side's defense. Avoid using lasers or explosive transmutations when attacking. Find opportunities to conduct freezing attacks using low-temperature matter. It is very likely that stealing heat will slow down the target's movement and regeneration speed. But if necessary for opening a path, go

ahead and attack with heavy firepower. Our main objective is to approach close enough to enter Catastrophe's range."
"Understood. Simply stated, we are taking the role of carrier-based aircraft."
"No problem. It's the same as the Dragon Subjugation Squad's usual work."
Lisa answered with her chest out while Firill made thumbs-up. Ariella and Ren also nodded firmly.
"There's nothing to do inside the ship, anyway. Let's go outside and raise some hell."
"Mm, adjustments to the OS are done. All that's left to do is fight."
However, Tia tilted her head curiously because she had not been named.
"Tia doesn't need to go outside?"
"You should stay at the bridge, prepared for electronic warfare. Although there has not been any reports of Bahamut being able to interfere with electronic equipment, better be safe than sorry. Furthermore... Who knows if NIFL will be our ally to the very end."
Shinomiya-sensei gave a wry smile sardonically. Stationing Tia at the bridge was mainly to defend against Atla, most likely.
Then Shinomiya-sensei's gaze shifted to Kili, who was standing behind everyone else.
"Kili Surtr Muspelheim, you will be in charge of guarding Iris Freyja. To avoid missing the opportunity to attack, Iris Freyja will remain on standby on the deck—However, it is probably impossible to stand on the ship's exterior without a barrier."
"Why do I have to do this sort of thing..."
Kili grumbled quietly in displeasure, but Iris held her hand with a radiant smile.
"I'm counting on you! With you protecting me, Kili-chan, I am reassured! Let's give it our best together!"
"—Placing such heavy trust in someone like me. Fine, since you've said this much... I will try my best without exerting myself."
Kili nodded a little helplessly.
Watching their conversation, I raised my hand.
"Hold on—I can go out to the deck too after the battle begins. I don't need to be in the bridge to control Marduk and it's better to have more people protecting Iris."
"Mononobe..."
Iris was happy to hear my suggestion.
"Good point, since you say so, then it is fine. After all, you are still Marduk's captain."
Shinomiya-sensei nodded in a slightly joking manner then said to the rest of the girls:
"Shion and Vritra will wait in the ship. Mononobe Mitsuki will be in charge of looking after them."
"Eh...?"

Mitsuki exclaimed in surprise.
Although Mitsuki was asked to look after them, this placed her in a position no different from Shion or Vritra. Rather, it was more like placing those two by Mitsuki's side on account of her condition.
"W-Wait! I need to fight too! This is no time to be holding combat potential in reserve!"
Seconds later, Mitsuki realized and suggested.
"I understand, but currently, it is very risky to let you go outside the ship. Since Bahamut is related to what is sealed within you, no one can predict what will happen if it came into contact with you."
"But—"
At a loss for words momentarily, Mitsuki looked at me for support.
She probably thought that as the "captain," I could overturn Shinomiya-sensei's decision, but...
"I'm sorry, Mitsuki, I feel the same way too. It's not that I don't want you to fight, but I hope to keep you away from danger as much as possible until the time when your power is truly needed—"
"...Enough. I understand."
Mitsuki interrupted me and turned her face away in extreme chagrin.
Just as the atmosphere in the bridge turned very awkward, Shinomiya-sensei announced in a loud and clear voice.
"Well then, everyone, prepare for battle. Those assigned outside the ship, head to the respective hatches."
Obeying orders, we made our way to the bridge's door. I looked back just as I was exiting into the corridor, only to see Mitsuki with her head down, her shoulders trembling slightly.

Part 4

"For what purpose exactly... did I come here...?"
I—Mononobe Mitsuki—gently stroked Shion-san's fluffy hair, murmuring quietly while sitting on the bed.
My feeble and helpless voice echoed inside the cramped cabin but no one could answer me.
Sleeping on my lap was Shion-san, who had already entered the sweet realm of dreams. Vritra had stayed at the bridge, so there were only two occupants in this cabin.
Residing within me was the ninth dragon... That darkness, it was possible to suppress it using two holders of Neun's authority including myself.
However, this was only currently.
Hence, Shion-san was doing her job properly even though she was sleeping.
She was a mate of Nii-sans's—One of those selected by Nii-san to become Neun.
As for Vritra, whose powers were sealed, she had also stayed behind on the ship as a key individual for figuring out the darkness.
"I am the only one of no help at all..."
Gazing upon Shion's sleeping face that reminded me of my best friend, I could not help but speak in self-deprecation.
I knew that ordering me to standby here was the appropriate judgment call.
Were I the commander, I would have issued the same order. I was currently akin to a bomb whose detonation could destroy the world. How could someone like me possibly be sent to the front lines?
Hence, everyone was protecting me. Nii-san and all the others were risking their lives to protect me.
I had no doubt that they were going to be victorious.
Although I told Shinomiya-sensei that it was no time to be holding combat potential in reserve, Nii-san would surely overcome all obstacles. Even if he were to fall somewhere, he would always stand up again to seize final victory.
After all, my Nii-san—Yuu-kun—has always helped me like this.
However... I am afraid of the arrival of that moment, even to the point of not wanting the fighting to end.
I had never told anyone this. I will never reveal these reasons.
Iris-san had asked me whether instinct was unacceptable. She also said that ultimately, whether love or affection, everything came from instinct.

I agree. Even if Nii-san's reason for placing me first in his heart was borne by instinct, I cannot assert that it is fake. However, it is wrong. What I feared was what would come after that—
Nevertheless, I must endure this fear.
Even if there was nothing I could do, I had to pray for Nii-san's victory at least... Until that moment arrived, if I stayed by his side as much as possible —

'Are you really fine with this?'

Someone rejected my mental efforts to persuade myself.
"Eh...?"
I suddenly looked up and surveyed the cabin. Only Shion-san and I were present.

'Mitsuki, are you really fine with this?'

This was no hallucination. The voice came from my feet—from my shadow formed from the light in the ceiling. Futhermore, that voice and manner of speaking sounded very familiar.
"Miya... ko...?"
Trembling, I called out that name.
Yes—That voice just now was undoubtedly the voice of Shinomiya Miyako—
My best friend who had passed away two years prior.
"Goo..."
And Miyako's daughter Shion remained asleep on my lap, apparently unaware.
I was frozen in surprise while the shadow at my feet began to quiver. The darkness undulated like waves.
Forming a blurred outline, the black shadow smiled with my best friend's face.

'I am on your side, Mitsuki. So—let's go realize your *true wish* together.'

My mind went blank. A moment later, wrath took over my heart.
The dragon mark on the back of my neck heated up. At the same time, the dragon mark on Shion-san's forehead glowed blue.
"The one known as the ninth dragon... I cannot believe it would stoop to such nonsense. How appalling—Shut up. Miyako is the only one allowed to smile using this face."
Following my impulse, I stomped hard on the shadow's imitation of Miyako.
A blue pulse spread in the darkness, causing Miyako's figure to gradually disappear.
"Huff... Huff..."

I panted then slowly raised my foot—My shadow had returned to its normal state.
Shion-san's dragon mark had stopped glowing and I knew that the crisis had passed.
This most likely happened because my mind had grown weak, but just as Vritra pointed out, it was still possible to suppress the darkness with two Neuns present.
I must carry myself with greater fortitude and willpower—
To encourage my unworthy self, I clenched my fist.
However, that voice remained in my ear, impossible to dispel. Again and again, again and again, her voice questioned me.
—Are you really fine with this?

Chapter 3 - Bahamut of Eternal Longevity

Part 1

On the interior side of the hatch leading to the deck, I waited for the moment to begin the operation. Was it a design consideration for space use? There was a double-door airlock chamber in front of the hatch.
Waiting beside me was Iris, with a nervous look on her face, and Kili, who was stretching with sleepy countenance.
Lisa and the others had gone to the hatches on starboard and port side, leaving only the three of us here who were heading to the deck.
"S-So... Kili-chan, you didn't get enough sleep?"
"Not really. Too much happened, so I basically didn't get to sleep."
Kili gave an ambiguous answer with a weary look.
"Looks like keeping Vritra company is a tough job."
I sympathized but Kili stared at me in disbelief.
"Oh my, how did you know my mother was the reason?"
"Uh, I didn't, but Vritra is always out of control, you know?"
Noticing my slip of the tongue, I hastily explained myself. Earlier, I had accidentally peeped on various things when I was observing the situation in the cabins, which was how I knew the hidden story. Disliking shampoo, Vritra was running all over the place, making a lot of trouble for Kili.
Would she find this odd? A chill and sweat began to spread down my back.
Fortunately, Kili did not seem bothered and she nodded vigorously.
"Yes, that's true. For the sake of my mother's puny dignity, I can't give any details, but it was very tiring."
"I see... It must be tough for you, Kili-chan. Oh, what about you, Mononobe? Will Marduk stay active if you're not at the bridge?"
After listening to Kili's response, Iris asked me.
"Yeah, no problem. Thanks to Jeanne taking over recon, I'm able to focus calmly on controlling the ship. Jeanne will share necessary external information with me, and I can control Marduk like an extension of my own body, so no matter where I am, it doesn't change the precision of my control."
Just by focusing my mind on Marduk, I could find out Bahamut's current location and the situation in the surroundings.
Marduk was currently flying north over a frozen ocean. We were going to encounter Bahamut and the NIFL fleet just by continuing forward.

"There should still be some time—We are currently following Bahamut's trail, flying behind it. Once NIFL engages Bahamut in battle, I'll accelerate all at once to close in. Once visual contact is made, we'll go out."
I switched on the communicator on my ear so that everyone else could hear me.
I heard "roger that" from everyone through the earpiece but next to me, Iris sounded the most nervous.
"R-Roger, but I'm so worried. The people at NIFL..."
Seeing Iris so ill at ease, I placed my hand on her head.
"According to reports from NIFL, other than the *Naglfar*, the only forces they are deploying are the unmanned battleships we saw during the Leviathan battle. If the line cannot be maintained, the flagship *Naglfar* will most likely withdraw, so don't worry."
"Really...? That's good to know."
Iris finally smiled but it was still very stiff. Next, Kili interjected in exasperation.
"Iris-chan—You've been worrying about others all the time, what about yourself? If you fail to use Catastrophe at the crucial moment, we're all in trouble, you know?"
"Eh... Oh, don't worry about that. I can generate Catastrophe, no problem. It's just that I'm a little worried since the method is not quite the same as before..."
Iris scratched her cheek and answered. I added:
"Iris used to be able to generate Catastrophe directly, but now she can't do without using dark matter as an intermediary. It's probably because I turned her back into a human I selected when she was transforming into Basilisk."
My explanation caused Kili to show overt displeasure.
"—Is this really okay? Since the generation process requires dark matter, shouldn't you make preparations like borrowing dark matter from others? In the worst-case scenario, we'll have to consider unsealing my mother..."
Kili pondered with a hand against the side of her face, but Iris hastily shook her head.
"Oh, you don't need to worry about that. I already found out during an examination when we returned to Midgard. Catastrophe has virtually no mass, so it's pretty much unrelated to the capacity to generate dark matter."
"Eh, that's something I didn't know. Then does that allow you to use it with greater power than before? If it's virtually massless, you can theoretically generate it without limit."
Very interested, Kili inquired of Iris.
"Hmm, how should I put it...? Rather than transmutation, to me it actually feels more like the dark matter is acting as a 'gate'... Although I don't know how much I can generate exactly, there should be a limit."
Kili shrugged at Iris who was answering with her head cocked.

"That's very wishy-washy, Iris-chan. You're the only one who can defeat Bahamut, so you've got to get your act together."
"Sob... Kili-chan, please don't put more pressure on me. Of course I'll give it my best shot."

Confronted with Iris' tearful gaze, Kili looked away in embarrassment.
"I know you're already trying your hardest. However, this isn't something that be taken care of through vigor or determination. Putting more thought into it is necessary."
Although Kili's words were a bit blunt, Iris showed a look of comprehension.
"Ah—Hey hey, Mononobe! Just now, did you hear that just now!?"
"Huh? What about... just now?"
Puzzled, I asked her in return, causing Iris to explain with slight displeasure.
"Seriously, don't you remember? Mononobe, didn't you give me the same advice before? Back when I couldn't do transmutation properly, didn't you say that just working hard wasn't enough? I had to confront my failures, something like that."
"...Now that you mention it, I think I did."
Memories surfaced from back when we first met and I was having special practice sessions in an underground training site together with Iris who had failed the test to get into the Dragon Subjugation Squad.
"But what about it?"
Although it was very nostalgic, I had no idea why Iris meant by bringing it up.
"So it's the same as what Kili-chan said, you know?"
"Oh, okay. Yeah, pretty much."
Overwhelmed by her vigor, I could not help but nod. Then I glanced at Kili. It seemed like the conversation had lost her, leaving her with a look of puzzlement.
Thus, Iris grabbed my hand and said with a happy smile:
"It's wonderful for the advice to be the same. Kili-chan and Mononobe are a bit alike."
"...Although I'm not offended by this comparison to Yuu, I don't get why you're so happy about this."
Unable to hide her confusion, Kili sighed.
"Eh? Oh... Why am I so happy?"
Even you don't know? Iris cocked her head in puzzlement.
"—Forget it. To be honest, no matter how much time I spend with you, I still can't say I understand you."
Exhausted in mind, Kili slumped her shoulders.
To me, Iris was also "a girl who effortlessly transcended expectation," beyond the realm of my understanding. Hence, I agreed completely with Kili on this point, but since Iris would get excited again, I kept this comment to myself.
"Captain, NIFL has engaged Bahamut."
At that moment, Jeanne's report came on the communicator. Linked to Marduk, she could speak to me mentally, but in order to share information with everyone, she would stick to using the communicator as much as possible.

"I copy that. Marduk, maximum atmospheric flight speed. We will exit the ship once Jeanne gives us the signal. Don't forget to deploy the air barrier."
While increasing Marduk's speed, I called out to Iris and Kili.
Close by, Iris and Kili nodded solemnly, then the others replied they were ready.
Feeling that the distance to the fifth calamity, the fifth dragon—"Eternal Life" Bahamut—was shrinking, I melded my consciousness into all of Marduk's armaments.

Part 2

To delay Bahamut from noticing us for as long as possible, Marduk descended from maximum altitude to stay as close to the frozen sea surface as was feasible.
A roughly ten-kilometer-wide black line was carved on the plain of ice. This was Bahamut's flight trail. While Bahamut flew, its shadow formed an unknown territory that was eating away at the Earth's surface.
Even Marduk's radar was unable to read anything from the black line.
And flying at the limit of the extending the unknown territory was the giant dragon with outspread wings.
Standing on the deck, I stared at the target within visual range that must be destroyed.
Standing next to me, Iris and Kili were also looking at the giant dragon with bated breath.
The target was still dozens of kilometers away. However, the ten-thousand-meter-long monster, flying high in the sky, was exhibiting an even stronger presence than the moon in the noon sky right now.
The scene before my eyes was like a mirage—Completely unreal. However, that thing... Bahamut was undoubtedly there.
Given Marduk's speed, we were going to engage the enemy in a few minutes.
"Looking at it in the flesh... It seems like a small island floating in the sky."
Deploying a composite barrier of heat and air on the deck, Kili whispered poignantly. Were it not for her barrier, we would not only be blown away by the strong wind but also frozen by the extremely low temperature around us.
Lisa and the others should be standing ready on starboard and port side as ordered. Since Marduk far surpassed the speed of flying by transmutation of air, we had no alternative option for flying to the battlefield.
"Its wings are not moving at all. Discharging flames from within its body... Rather than a living organism, it's more like aircraft, right?"
Staring at Bahamut afar, Iris commented. She was holding her fictional armament, Caduceus.
"It's probably using flame jets for thrust. Like you say, Iris, it's more like an airplane. But... If it really came from outside of Earth, then it's a spaceship rather than a jet plane."
While aiming Marduk's weaponry at Bahamut, I answered Iris' question.

The target was now locked. There were weapons capable of sniping from this range. However, since Major Loki was already drawing Bahamut's attention, there was no need for us to attack before it noticed us. More importantly, we needed to allow Iris' Catastrophe to hit.
Listening to us, Kili seemed to notice a problem.
"Outside of Earth—I see, that's definitely the kind of creatures the 'true dragons' are. However, if Bahamut is a creature that feeds on heat, why would it visit Earth. Logically speaking, wouldn't it go to the Sun instead?"
"Now that you mention it, yeah. In other words, its objective isn't absorbing energy...?"
Kili's observation made me tilt my head in thought but I could not figure out what else Bahamut could be aiming for. However, Iris seemed to think of something and she said to me:
"Maybe Bahamut has preferences? For example, if you give me bunch of green peppers, which I don't like, I'd rather have Mitsuki-chan's tasty sweets."
"Quality over quantity? It's not impossible."
After I commented, Kili smiled wryly and nodded.
"Fufu, that's very Iris-chan. Perhaps on this planet, there is something particularly attractive to dragons."
"Something attractive..."
These words stirred some kind of thought inside me, but an urgent voice on the communicator interrupted my thinking.
'—Engaged in battle with NIFL, Bahamut is exhibiting change. A massive amount of thermal energy is detected at its head. Currently increasing rapidly!'
The instant I looked in the direction of Marduk's course, intense light flashed through the sky.
An explosive scene occurred, almost as though the sun had risen from the north.
Orange flames scorched the far shore on the horizon with the giant dragon's black silhouette overlaid on top.
'Bahamut seems to have released a heat beam. The NIFL fleet deployed in front of Bahamut has gone missing—Most likely vaporized.'
"Tsk... Major Loki—How is the *Naglfar*?"
'The flagship *Naglfar* evaded in the nick of time; it is still intact. Oh—They just contacted us. The operation will continue, just that the defense line has collapsed and it is no longer possible to halt Bahamut's advance. They will act as a diversion to confuse Bahamut.'
"Understood. Still... That firepower is quite unbelievable. This is the first time for Bahamut to execute a clear attack on its own, right?"
Watching the steam rising, I asked Jeanne.
'Indeed. The Atlantean weapons equipped on the *Naglfar* and the cooling projectiles used by the fleet must have been effective to some extent. Since Bahamut saw NIFL as an enemy, one could say that the operation is

proceeding smoothly. We will be able to launch a heavy assault from behind with ease.'
"Yeah—But don't be careless, everyone. Tell me immediately if it shows signs of intercepting us. Iris, how much close do we need to approach for you to get into range?"
While I was issuing orders to Jeanne, I asked Iris.
"Umm... It's different from before, I no longer send out Catastrophe in a 'zap!' ...Since I'll be using dark matter to transmute from Bahamut's surroundings, distance won't matter much. Although we're still far away, I can aim as long as I can see clearly."
"Really? Then your range might be even longer than before. If that's the case, we can launch the attack first without worrying too much."
Her reply reassured me somewhat.
Iris' ability should be more restricted than before, but an advantage had arisen.
When Basilisk used Catastrophe, there was a range limit. This applied to Iris too when she fired Catastrophe directly.
But now, with the target was so gigantic and hovering in midair, it was possible to make visual confirmation from farther away and attack.
"Iris, get ready to attack. Give the signal when you feel you can attack."
"Yeah!"
Iris nodded with a tense expression then took a step forward, wielding her staff fictional armament.
"Iris-chan, don't get impatient, okay? If the first strike fails, Bahamut will surely see us as a threat and attack us. Anyway, take a deep breath and relax first."
Kili offered advice to Iris, whose entire body was tense, then patted her on the shoulder.
"Inhale... Exhale... Thanks, Kili-chan. I'm much more relaxed now."
"...Don't mention it. If you miss, we'll all be in trouble."
Kili avoided eye contact while making a harsh comment, but she frowned when her gaze met with mine.
"Yuu, do you have something to say?"
"Nope, or rather, what I wanted to say is no longer needed."
I shrugged and shook my head.
"...You're so bad."
Kili's face reddened slightly and she moved to stand a step forward. Smiling wryly, I watched the same direction as her.
After getting closer, I could see flashes of light around Bahamut intermittently. The battle continued to rage on.
Amid the tense atmosphere, we stayed wary of Bahamut while waiting for the signal.
Ten seconds, twenty seconds, thirty seconds—
Bahamut's silhouette gradually became large, bringing an increasing sense of mass. We could now recognize it as a three dimensional entity.

The heat beam discharged by the giant dragon vaporized the frozen ocean surface, causing a massive explosion. A brief moment later, the shockwave arrived, shaking Marduk slightly.
When the shaking stopped, Iris finally gave the signal.
"Mononobe, from here, I'll probably—no, I'll definitely hit it!"
"Got it! Marduk, begin deceleration. Lisa, you and the others will take care of Bahamut's attacks. Spread out from the sides of the ship."
I lowered the ship speed to stabilize its flight while issuing orders to everyone else. Since Iris was now able to attack, there was no need to continue approaching. After that, all we needed to do was use Marduk's equipment and the power of the Ds to keep Iris safe.
'—Affirmative. Off we go, everyone!'
At Lisa's signal, the girls took flight from the decelerated Marduk.
There were no changes in Bahamut's movements at the moment. It continued to attack the *Naglfar* and NIFL's remaining forces.
"Preparations are complete, Iris. Let us exterminate Bahamut!"
"Yeah!"
Facing forward, Iris nodded firmly then raised her staff fictional armament.
"—Come, come, fragments of the Far Beyond..."
She recited the incantation that I had heard many times before. These were words spoken for focusing one's mind.
Back when she used Catastrophe directly, her incantation was a little different. But this time, she was using the words for generating dark matter, because she needed to summon dark matter to transmute into Catastrophe.
"Come, come, fragments of the Far Beyond!"
Iris repeated the same words in a forceful tone of voice. Although unseen by the naked eye, dark matter should be generating in Bahamut's surroundings.
Next, for the sake of destroying Bahamut, Iris narrowed the infinite possibility possessed by the dark matter down to a single one.
"Catastrophe—Actualize!!"
With these words, Bahamut in the distance was enveloped in red light. This was the glow of Catastrophe.
The authority of weathering, stealing time from all creation—
Although I had worried whether it was possible to weather a ten-kilometer-long giant dragon all at once, such concerns turned out to be unnecessary.
—Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!
A deep roar like thunder could be heard from afar. This was probably Bahamut screaming in pain.
Inside the light, Bahamut was struggling. Completely unfazed earlier during the intense battle against NIFL, the black dragon lost balance and fell from a great height.
This was surely Catastrophe taking effect. However—
"Jeanne, any change in Bahamut's size?"

I asked through the communicator.
Indeed—I could not see any signs of Catastrophe causing any change in Bahamut's size. Minor crumbling should happen if its body had been weathered, but even though tormented by the red light, Bahamut still maintained its original form.
'Although there was a momentary decrease, there is no change currently. This is just a guess, but Bahamut probably increased its rate of metabolism, growing new skin before the outer layer was weathered away.'
"Hmm... A draw between the rate of weathering and cell division. Did it develop resistance against Catastrophe—"
Hearing Jeanne's report, I could not help but gasp, but then I heard Lisa's voice.
'No, I believe the issue does not lie with Bahamut. Please examine Catastrophe's color carefully!'
"Color?"
Troubled, I looked at the red glow surrounding Bahamut. Speaking of which, something definitely felt off. It seemed different from the Catastrophe I had previously seen until now...
'—Mm. I get it. Compared to before... it's less concentrated.'
Ren's voice through the communicator made me realize it too.
"Yeah, the red hue should be more intense."
Just as I muttered, Kili cried out from close by.
"Hey, so this means Catastrophe isn't concentrated enough—In other words, the output is lacking!? Iris-chan, if this continues, you won't be able to weather Bahamut away, you know?"
Confronted with Kili's question, Iris kept her fictional armament raised at Bahamut and replied:
"Sorry... I know that... But surrounding all of Bahamut... is already putting me at my limit—"
Iris's voice sounded pained and her arm was trembling too. She was definitely doing her best already.
"Limit? Impossible. The authority you inherited from Basilisk came into existence to defeat Bahamut. In other words, you are the only one who can defeat that thing. I will cheer for you, so show me some backbone!"
"Kili-chan cheering for me... I'm so happy, but... No matter how much harder I try, I still, dunno... Also—"
At that moment, Iris stopped talking and turned to me. I could see fear in her eyes, so I rushed over to pat her on the shoulder.
"Iris..."
Should I ask her to try harder or tell her not to strain herself? Neither was the right thing to say, so I remained silent.
"Mononobe—I..."
Just as Iris was about to continue what she was saying, Jeanne's voice interrupted.

'Bahamut is about to shoot something from its back! Quantity is twenty. Aimed at us!'
I looked up to see multiple small shadows fly through the red light and rise into the sky.
'The projectiles show readings of high energy. Probably—bombs... No, missiles! Currently approaching, accelerating, too late to take evasive action!'
—Missiles? Created from inside the body?
But now was not the time to be shocked.
Jeanne shared with me what data had been captured through radar.
Through my senses, I obtained the current coordinates of the incoming fast-moving missiles.
"I will intercept them! If I miss any, I'm counting on the rest of you, Lisa!"
'Affirmative!'
Hearing the replies from Lisa and the others, I used my mind to lock onto every projectile. At the same time, I connected the depths of my mind to one of Marduk's armaments, and spoke sharply:
"Hyperspace reversion rocket-assisted artillery, Abyss—Fire!!"
The missile pods at the back of Marduk opened up, launching multiple warheads into the sky.
The white exhaust streaked across the blue sky, leaving trails. The warheads rushed at the enemy projectiles. Abyss was a weapon for ripping holes in space and would have no problem detonating projectiles.
However, just before the warheads reached the targets, there was a cataclysmic development.
'—The projectiles have split! There are now forty of them!'
"Damn it!"
The instant I heard Jeanne's report, I detonated the Abyss warheads.
Multiple black punctures appeared in the sky, sucking in the projectiles that had split apart. Hyperspace that was not supposed to exist was crushed together with real space, destroying it along with the projectiles. However, several shadows passed through the gaps to fly at Marduk.
Covered in black scales like Bahamut's surface, the projectiles approached the battleship with flarebacks.
Just as Jeanne had said, these were definitely missiles.
"Thirty-six destroyed. Four intact—"
'If only four remain, leave them to us.'
Firill replied.
'Everyone, to stop them from exploding, use cryogens to freeze them!'
'Mm!'
Ren and the others responded to Firill's call and took individual action to intercept the incoming flying objects.
'Freeze, ice fang!'
From the starboard, Lisa took the lead by unleashing a flash of blue-white light. The others followed and released cryogens at the projectiles.

Bathed under intense cold air and extremely low-temperature matter, the projectiles were frozen, losing their flarebacks. Losing speed, the projectiles fell towards the frozen ocean surface.
But without giving us any time to catch our breath, Jeanne called out urgently again.
'Bahamut is starting to turn, apparently intending to escape Catastrophe! If Bahamut faces us squarely, there is a high probability we will be exposed to a heat beam!'
I looked in the direction the ship was advancing. Indeed, Bahamut was slowly turning.
Although Iris was trying hard, the red light had become even fainter than before. In light of that, I made decision.
"Jeanne, retreat. Lisa, you and the others return to the ship at once. We will withdraw from the battle zone with maximum speed. Also inform Major Loki —NIFL—of our decision to retreat."
'—Roger that'
Jeanne answered with frustration, but Kili did not hide her dissatisfaction.
"Are you giving up, Yuu? It's too soon to decide that Iris-chan has failed."
"We are not giving up, but simply regrouping. I believe in Iris, but right now, we need more time."
My words caused Iris' shoulder to shake. She barely squeezed out some words:
"Mononobe... Everyone... I'm sorry."
"No need to apologize. Iris, you already did everything you could. You didn't fail."
After I patted her silver-haired head, Iris nodded lightly and looked down.
Given our current combat strength, we could not defeat Bahamut. Learning of this was in itself valuable intel. All we needed to do next was to figure out how to make up for what we lacked.
Standing on Marduk's deck while the ship altered its course, I stared at Bahamut afar.
Was it going to chase us? Or would it continue towards its target, the unknown territory at the Arctic?
It was anyone's guess until it happened. While urging Iris and Kili back into the ship, I continued to ponder how to defeat the giant dragon.

Part 3

"—Bahamut has returned to its course towards the north. No missiles are chasing us."
After everyone returned to the bridge, Jeanne's report allowed me to breathe a sigh of relief.
We managed to avoid a decisive battle. However, this meant that we could no longer prevent Bahamut from making contact with the Arctic unknown territory.
Major Loki looked grave on the *Naglfar*, his face displayed on a monitor.
'We have no idea what will happened when Bahamut links up two unknown territories. But it should be heading to the next territory in the northern part of the African continent. We will intercept it along its route at the second defense line set up in the waters of Norway.'
Without blaming us for the failure earlier, Major Loki simply related the next plan indifferently. On the other hand, the machine intellect Atla, appearing onscreen in the form of a fairy, subjected us to verbal abuse.
"You useless trash! Work harder, fools!" However, Major Loki tapped his fingers on her head on the screen to make her settle down. Perhaps it was a touchscreen on his end.
'If the second defense line were to be breached, the unknown territory would most likely devour the mainland while continuing its invasion. In that event, losses will be incalculable. No matter what, we must stop it there.'
A predicted route of Bahamut's course was shown on the monitor. One of the names there was the Principality of Erlia, Firill's homeland.
"……Of course. We will for sure."
While looking at the map, Firill whispered with determination.
'I would like you all to participate in the second defense line. Although Catastrophe cannot be used to destroy Bahamut in one strike, it is still undoubtedly the most effective means of attack. Based on the current situation, we are considering the option of using maximum firepower to pare down Bahamut's body in conjunction to exposure to Catastrophe to see if it will be effective—However, please tell us if you have a better suggestion.'
"Understood."
After I nodded, Major Loki finally showed one of his usual smiles.
'I am expecting great things from you, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe. The operation will commence six hours from now, so given Marduk's speed,

there is no problem. Asgard has deemed Bahamut a new dragon, so we are able to use countermeasures for dragon disasters as appropriate. Even passing over various signatory nations of the treaty will not be considered invasion of their airspace. Well then, let us meet again at the battlefield.'
"And you, rubbish tree and company! I won't forgive any of you if you fail again!"
Communications with the *Naglfar* terminated with Atla's voice. The bridge returned to silence for now.
I could feel everyone's gaze gathered on me, so I took a deep breath. After sweeping my gaze across the bridge once, I noticed Mitsuki and Shion's absence. They were probably on standby in a cabin, but I felt ashamed that I did not even maintain enough composure to keep track of my teammates.
—Major Loki was very calm. If I don't think about what needed to be done now... If I don't think about what could be done...
"Set course for the second defense line at Norway."
After I declared briefly, Jeanne instantly responded from her seat in front of a monitor.
"Affirmative. Destination set. If we take the shortest route at cruise speed, we will be able to converge with NIFL ten minutes before the operation. Shinomiya-sensei, may I trouble you to contact the various nations along the route?"
"Very well, leave it to me."
Seeing Shinomiya-sensei nod and prepare for communications, I issued orders to the rest.
"Everyone else, please rest until we reach the destination. Iris, could you come with me?"
My words made Iris froze. She replied in a trembling voice.
"Um... I knew it, you're... mad at me, right?"
"No, I'm not. Iris, I said you didn't fail, right? I just want you to accompany me to visit Mitsuki. Tell her what it felt like when you were trying your hardest and see if the two of you can think together to come up with a better method."
I smiled wryly and shook my head.
"Together with Mitsuki-chan...?"
Surprised, Iris repeated my words.
"Yeah, in terms of using dark matter to invoke authorities, both Mitsuki and I are the same. So perhaps you might find unexpected inspiration by chatting with Mitsuki."
At that moment, Vritra interjected.
"In that case, I shall join the discussion. After observing ye battle from here, I have many thoughts."
"—Sure. Vritra, your knowledge seems quite reliable."
"Fufu, as expected of my comrade. Thou knowest the truth."
When I answered, Vritra smiled with satisfaction.
"Looks like Yuu has gradually figured out how to deal with my mother."

Watching our interactions, Kili shrugged slightly.

Part 4

After the team was dismissed for the time being, I went to visit Mitsuki's cabin together with Iris and Vritra.
But then, I was plunged into an unexpected situation.
"Nii-san, you truly know how to enjoy yourself."
Mitsuki was glaring down at me coldly while I was sitting on the bed.
"This isn't enjoyable for me at all..."
Feeling the weight on top of me, I replied to Mituski.
"How now? Dost thou have objections as my chair?"
Sitting on my lap, Vritra looked up at me with a scowl.
"Papa, iS It heAvY?"
Hugging my back, resting her head against my shoulder, Shion leaned in and asked.
"Mononobe... It must be tough for you."
Sitting to my left, Iris was very worried but because we were seated tightly against each other, my elbow was touching her bust. While taking care not to let that soft sensation produce a flustered expression on my face, I shook my head.
"Don't worry, well—She's not that heavy. No problem."
Left without a choice, I could only sigh in resignation.
Squeezing two people in a cabin meant for a single occupant was cramped enough already, and right now, there was a total of five of us. All kinds of outrageous behavior were only inevitable.
The only places that could be sat on were the chair and the bed. Hence, other than Mitsuki, everyone else had gathered on the bed.
"Nii-san, you are spoiling her too much. Shion-san can be overlooked, but is it really necessary to have Vritra on your lap? If it is cramped, then simply have her sit on the edge."

Mitsuki pointed to my right and spoke, but Vritra shrugged.
"What art thou speaking about? Know that 'tis intentional that I conceded the space. 'Tis imperative at the moment to ensure thy mental stability. Even one such as I am considerate of such matters."
"...S-Since there is a chair, anyway, I have no need to sit on the bed..."
Looking flustered, Mitsuki declined with a blush.
"Thou wilt not sit hither? 'Tis jealousy I see in you... So be it, 'tis apparent that reading human emotions from their faces is no easy task."
Vritra crossed her arms and sighed in disappointment. Shion also inclined her little head sadly and asked, "mItSukI, yoU'Re nOt gOnnA siT?"
Seeing Shion's reaction, Mitsuki sat down on my right with a reluctant expression.
"Then I shall graciously take my seat here, or else that would be waste of your care and consideration. Furthermore... Perhaps, now is the only time when I could do this sort of thing."
Showing a lonely expression for just an instant, Mitsuki entwined her arm around my right arm and leaned against me. The warmth and fragrance of her body, as well as the softness of her skin, were making my heart pound nonstop.
"Mitsuki...?"
"Nii-san, I would like to be even closer... Would you be alright with that?"
Mitsuki looked up and asked. I instantly nodded.
"Sure, no problem. It's totally alright with me."
"—Is that so? I see. Since you say that now, Nii-san... Then the matter of not being a lie would also..."
Despite smiling, Mitsuki's expression was full of gloom. I did not completely understand her meaning either.
However, before I could ask for clarification, Mitsuki pushed the discussion forward.
"Well then, let us begin to discuss the matter of Iris-san's Catastrophe lacking sufficient firepower. I did not witness the battle against Bahamut first hand, so please explain the situation at the time to me."
Mitsuki leaned forward and spoke past me to Iris who was sandwiching me from the other side.
"Okay, umm—"
Iris proceeded to explain what happened when she invoked Catastrophe against Bahamut and I supplemented details from the side.
While we were talking, Shion yawned in boredom whereas Vritra sat quietly on my lap, swaying her legs.
After listening, Mitsuki pondered for a moment.
"...You summoned dark matter at coordinates over a wider range in order to cover Bahamut's entire body, but Catastrophe's intensity was weakened—Is that correct? Allow me to confirm, this was not due to a shortage of dark matter, was it?"
Mitsuki asked Iris solemnly.

"No, I feel that there was enough dark matter, but there's a limit to the amount that can be transmuted... Umm, like pouring furikake seasoning from a bottle, only a bit comes out with each shake, right? Like this."
Iris simulated the act of shaking furikake out of its bottle while answering.
"Although your analogy is a little odd... In any case, I understand. In other words, it is a limit unrelated to the generating capacity of dark matter. Perhaps my antimatter has the same restriction, but since I never attempted using it to the limit, I did not become aware of it. After all, even a tiny amount of antimatter would already be very dangerous... What about you, Nii-san?"
Faced with Mitsuki's question, I thought while answering.
"That's true... Whether Leviathan's antigravitational matter or Hraesvelgr's Ether Wind, I can summon them beyond my dark matter generating capacity, so I don't know if I have a limit either. However—"
"However?"
Sitting on my lap, Vritra looked up and urged me to continue.
"...There was one time when I generated Ether Wind directly. Back then, the Ether Wind enveloping me had very high density. Now that I think about it, how should I put this? I guess the only way to bring out an authority's original power is to use it without going through dark matter as an intermediary."
Recalling my battle against Major Loki, I expressed the above opinion. After finding out that Hraesvelgr's authority was residing in my heart, I was able to *turn into Hraesvelgr* temporarily to defeat Major Loki.
"All things considered, it means employing the same method as the real Hraesvelgr and Basilisk did... Excuse me, Nii-san. After listening to all this—I have noticed something."
Gazing squarely at my face, Mitsuki spoke.
"You noticed something?"
"Indeed. Bahamut's body length is ten kilometers—ten thousand meters, correct?"
"Yeah, what about it?"
I nodded. Mitsuki glanced at Iris and continued.
"In that case... Nii-san, do you remember the range of Basilisk's Catastrophe?"
"Well—it's been a while..."
Unable to recall it instantly, I scratched my head. Mitsuki proceeded to reveal the correct answer on my behalf.
"Normally, the Catastrophe shot out from the pair of eyes in Basilisk's head has a range of five thousand meters. The third eye on its back had a range of approximately *ten thousand meters*."
"Ten thousand meters..."
I gasped and repeated the words that Mitsuki had given emphasis to.
"Indeed, it is identical to Bahamut's body length. If this is not coincidence—if Basilisk is the counterdragon born to vanquish Bahamut—then *this third*

eye would be the organ that existed specifically for defeating Bahamut, would it not?"
The cabin returned to silence. Messing around behind me, Shion settled down due to the mood.
"Impossible—would be a rash assertion. But if that's the case..."
Nodding stiffly, I broke the silence and looked at Iris on my left. When our gazes met, Iris shuddered and looked down.
Vritra, who had been silent so far, followed up on my comment and announced:
"Bahamut can only be defeated by Basilisk. That is to say, Iris Freyja—the one who hath inherited the authority—Thou must transform into Basilisk."
With her head low, Iris clutched my hand firmly. Vritra spoke to her:
"'Twas mine intention to share this idea with ye all, but 'tis convenient that ye reached this conclusion on your own. Nay... Thou already realized since the beginning, yes?"
When asked, Iris exhaled deeply.
"—Yeah. You're right. If I can't do it as I am now... Then it might be possible to defeat Bahamut if I transform into Basilisk."
At that moment, Iris looked up and made eye contact with me.
"But I don't know how to turn into Basilisk either... And I'm so scared of breaking out in scales all over my body like last time, becoming non-human. That's why I didn't bring it up... I'm sorry."
"It's only natural to be scared. No need to apologize. I understand very well... how you feel."
I hugged Iris around her shoulders and whispered in her ear gently.
Kraken Zwei—Back when we were fighting the one who was now Shion, I personally witnessed Iris' transformation into Basilisk. Hence, I should not blame her for cowardice.
However, Vritra broke the heavy atmosphere in apparent nonchalance.
"What, this is what thou fearest? Worry not. Even if thou transformed into Basilisk for a moment, 'tis ought to be possible to turn back."
"Eh...?"
Iris was shocked. Thumping my chest, Vritra continued:
"Verily, this man turned back to human after transforming into Hraesvelgr. Neun's authority hath the effect of maintaining one's outer form and existence, presumably. Mononobe Mitsuki, who was supposed to be progressively devoured by darkness, still maintained her existence too, hence 'twould be logical to come to propose such a conjecture."
Glancing at Mitsuki, Vitra shrugged lightly.
"Naturally, I cannot assert with absolute certainly. Unexpected results could not be ruled out. Be that as it may, so long as this man exists, 'tis possibly for him to select thee again. So long as the slightest element of a D persists, transformation into the same kind ought to be effective."
Hearing this, Iris' face finally brightened up.

"Really—I see! So it'll be definitely be fine if Mononobe's with me... Why didn't something so simple occur to me?"
Iris scratched the back of her head shyly then hugged my arm with a smile.
"H-Hey—"
Buried in Iris' soft cleavage, I was at a loss how to react, but she tightened her grip on me.
"Hmm.. I won't be scared anymore. No matter what happens... I have faith that Mononobe will save me."
Then imitating Iris, Shion hugged my neck.
"mE tOo, aS loNg as Papa iS hEre, i'M noT scAreD."
Seeing me pat Shion's hand to tell her to be more gentle, Mitsuki smiled too.
"...How true. It is all because of Nii-san that I could be who I am."
Mitsuki rested her head on my shoulder and the atmosphere in the room relaxed subtly However, one murmured comment from Iris made me realize that the problem was not completely solved yet.
"But how do I use Catastrophe like before...?"
"'Tis not something I would know."
Vritra distanced herself from the issue directly, so Iris asked me:
"So, Mononobe, how did you turn into Hraesvelgr last time?"
"I remember back then, I was just about to lose consciousness when I found myself stuck in the boundary between dreams and reality. Then I saw the Ether Wind... and noticed where Hraesvelgr's authority resides."
"Where the authority resides?"
Lost and confused, Iris tilted her head.
"Yeah, Ether Wind resides in my heart. When I realized this and used the ability consciously, I entered the same state as Hraesvelgr once did."
When living things were enveloped in Ether Wind, due to the spirit materializing inside the body, they would become immobilized. However, if the spirit could surround the body at the moment it was enveloped by Ether Wind, the body would be able to move freely.
That incredible feeling was something quite hard for me to articulate in words.
"I see... Then my power—Basilisk's—must reside somewhere."
Iris murmured then she instantly placed her hand over her eyes.
"—It's the eyes. Basilisk shot out Catastrophe from its eyes, right? Then if that's the case..."
Mitsuki nodded deeply in response.
"That sounds very likely. Since the same applies to the third eye too, the connection between Catastrophe and the eyes must be very deep."
"I know, right? But we need to confirm it in addition to speculating... Do I need to take a nap and dream like Mononobe?"
Seeing Iris say that with her arms crossed, I was a bit worried.
"No, definitely not. Falling asleep completely won't work. Close your eyes and shift your consciousness from within—Try that?"

"Yeah, I got it! Then I'll try it inside an empty cabin!"
Iris stood up from the bed and Vritra jumped down swiftly from my lap.
"In that case, I shall come along too. I shall watch to ensure thou dost not fall into slumber. 'Tis a grave matter indeed. Should thou fail to vanquish Bahamut, this planet shall meet its end before the ninth dragon's true form is elucidated."
"Thank you so much, Vritra-chan!"
Just as Iris thanked happily, an announcement was heard in the cabin.
'—Report from NIFL. Bahamut has reached the Arctic's unknown territory. No special changes at the moment. Just as predicted, Bahamut has changed its course towards the third unknown territory.'
Halfway through the announcement, Shion cried out happily, "iT's Mama's vOiCe!"
Iris tensed her expression and clenched her fist tightly before her chest.
"Along the way... is Firill-chan's homeland, right? I must succeed next time!"
"Yeah, you can do it, Iris. I'll support you with all my power."
Rather than merely consoling her, I spoke with sincere belief.
"Yes—If it is Iris-san, the outcome will surely be fine."
Perhaps in chagrin because she could not stand on the front line? Mitsuki encouraged Iris as though looking at something dazzling.
"iRiS, Do yOur bEst."
Despite not understanding the situation, Shion also cheered for Iris.
"Yes, leave it to me!"
Iris made a thumbs-up and accepted our support, then left the cabin together with Vritra.
Numerous human lives, many countries, and the Earth itself, was at stake in this battle—And it was fast approaching.

Part 5

After Nii-san returned to the bridge, leaving Shion and I, just the two of us, in the cabin, I—Mononobe Mitsuki—contemplated.
—The location of an authority, huh?
So far, this had never occurred to me. My authority to generate antimatter ought to be from the Kraken—no, received from Miyako, who had passed it along to me.
Indeed... Not inherited, but passed along.
After all, I was able to use antimatter before taking out the Kraken.
Just like how Nii-san had divided Code Lost and passed it along to us, Miyako must have transferred a portion of her power to me.
However, this raised a question. The ability to transfer authorities was due to our status as "mates"—because all of us shared strong bonds with Nii-san. Was there such a powerful bond between Miyako and me back then? If so, then surely it was...
Pressing my hand against the dragon mark on the back of my neck, I shook my head.
I did not know if this was the correct answer. Hence, I could only contemplate. If I did not ponder the matter at hand...
I switched mindsets and restarted my thinking.
The authorities I held numbered a total of four.
First was my ability to generate dark matter as a D. Although it felt like my own power, in reality, it was an ability arising from Vritra going around and spreading genes. I must own up to the fact that this was the authority of Vritra as a counterdragon.
Second was what I had received from Miyako, the Kraken's power. Antimatter. Like Catastrophe and dark matter, this was also an authority that had arisen to oppose a past calamity.
Third was Code Lost, which Nii-san had transferred to me. What I had received was only one part of it, so diluted that I could not even sense it myself. However, were it in its complete form, Code Lost would be a fearsome power that could twist human fates and kill humanity just through one's thoughts alone.
As for the fourth, the blue light that was sealing away the ninth calamity—
"In addition to dark matter, antimatter, and Code Lost... It is only logical that I possess an authority as Neun. If I could figure out where it is located and how to use it, I would be able to help Nii-san—"

Just as I uttered these words, organizing my thoughts as to what needed to be done at the moment, Shion-san looked up from the picture book she was reading on the bed.
"i kNow wHerE anTiMattEr is. hERe—leFt eYe."
Shion-san lifted her hair and exposed the left eye that she usually kept covered.
"Eh... Sh-Shion-san, you know this?"
"yEah, i jUsT dO."
Seeing Shion-san nod calmly, I held my breath.
—Speaking of which, Shion-san was able to use antimatter too. Well, born as Kraken Zwei, perhaps Shion-san understood her authority from the very beginning.
I covered my left eye with my hand and began to think.
—My authority ought to be here, assuming my case is the same as Shion-san's. Although Iris-san said that Basilisk's authority might be in the eyes... Perhaps it was the right eye.
"Shion-san, are you able to generate antimatter directly when you want to?
"...dUnNo. wItH Papa and Mama—and eVerYone—bY My siDe now, nO neEd to usE iT."
Seeing Shion-san a little troubled, I realized how foolish a question I had asked.
"My apologies, I asked you a weird question."
Walking over to Shion-san, I caressed her head, causing her to close her eyes partially in pleasure.
Her expression made me smile too. At the same time, I asked myself honestly.
The Kraken had released antimatter from its purple eyeball. It was related to the eye.
During the car accident in which my parents passed away, I could not see anything amid the darkness... To the point that I could not even distinguish my own being. However, upon hearing Nii-san's voice—I was able to recall myself.
In that instant, what had I seen? What had I felt?
I tried my hardest to dig up my memories, to awaken the sensations that had been carved upon my body.
"—"
A sudden shock flashed through my entire body, causing me to groan lightly.
"Oh, I see now..."
I understood everything. The location of the authority, as well as its true nature.
And I understood too, that I had become a *genuine Neun* sooner than anyone else.

Chapter 4 - Pitch-Black Disaster

Part 1

The instant I opened the hatch, I almost lost balance due to a gust of strong wind. I steadied myself with a hand against the wall.
Currently, Marduk had decreased its altitude and its speed was dropping rapidly too. Hence, I decided it was possible to go outside even without an air barrier. However, this wind pressure was capable of blowing an entire person away if one were careless.
Arriving on Marduk's deck, I gripped the railing while moving towards the prow. Someone was already there.
Her shoulder-length hair and skirt swaying in the wind, she was looking down from the edge of the deck.
"—Can you see it, Firill?"
I approached her—Firill Crest—while asking in a voice loud enough to overcome the wind.
Only then did she notice and turn towards me with slight surprise. She smiled.
"Yes, I can see it. Thank you, Mononobe-kun, for making a detour to fulfill my selfish request."
"No problem, there's plenty of time before the operation starts. Furthermore, this isn't really a detour. The Principality of Erlia borders our charted course anyway."
I shook my head and asked the grateful Firill not to worry.
Indeed, Marduk was currently flying over Firill's homeland, the Principality of Erlia. Looking down from the deck, the view of a country rich with natural beauty, ringed by mountains, entered my sight.
"...It's such a tiny nation when I look down from the sky like this. But to me, it is an extremely place that I don't want to lose. That's why I wanted to confirm. What I must protect at all costs."
Firill looked out to her homeland while gripping the railing.
"Yeah—It must be extremely important to you."
Expressing determination to protect her homeland, the side of Firill's face overlapped with my memory of Mitsuki, who had defended the town where we lived in the past.
"Oh, Mononobe-kun! Look at that castle! And over there, a lake and a waterfall! Do you still remember?"
Firill pointed at the royal castle and the lake beside it.

"I didn't forget. We even danced together at the castle, and the waterfall was so loud."
My memories surfaced. This was the country where my first encounter with Hraesvelgr took place. The memories of the battle were especially vivid.
"So nostalgic... It feels like it just happened in front of me. However, this messes up the promise a little."
"Promise?"
Seeing Firill murmur in disappointment, I asked, and she smiled mischievously.
"My intention was to bring you back as my prince, Mononobe-kun, the next time I returned here."
"What—"
Firill admitted this with a blush, causing my heart to pound nonstop.
"Well, I suppose I've achieved the goal, sort of... Mononobe-kun, you said you'd take responsibility... Hmm, but you haven't fulfilled your promise properly yet. Oh, why don't we—"
After contemplating for a moment, resting the side of her face against her hand, Firill puffed out her chest as though she had thought of something.
"Mononobe-kun, this airspace belongs to the Principality of Erlia, doesn't it?"
"Yeah, that's right."
Shaken by her earlier words, I nodded stiffly.
"As such, I am the princess right now. Within this country, I am a super VIP."
"VIP—But isn't the Principality a democracy even though they have royalty?"
"Even so, I'm still a VIP, you know? I have clout and authority. Any objections...?"
"None at all."
"Excellent. So, the VIP—this princess—hereby commands. Mononobe-kun, kneel down before me."
With royal dignity in her countenance, Firill declared solemnly.
"Why?"
"Stop talking and just do it now."
"...Fine, I got it."
I gave up and sighed, then knelt down on one knee in front of Firill. I hastily bowed my head because kneeling down had provided me a view of the underside of the skirt billowing in the wind.
Next, in front of me while I was crouched down, Firill extended her hand.
"Kiss the back of my hand."
"K-Kiss!?"
I could not help but exclaim in hesitation. Then Firill spoke with some displeasure.
"I heard you did this with Lisa. Don't tell me... you won't do it with me? This is very important."

Her voice sounded extremely serious with mild insecurity in her expression.
Indeed, at Midgard's underground hot spring, after the comedic "transformation into my kind," I had kissed the disappointed Lisa on the back of her hand.
Being close friends with Lisa, Firill must have heard about what happened.
"—Understood."
I mustered my determination and took Firill's hand.
Since this was what she hoped, I had to grant her wish. This was out of my own volition, not responsibility for selecting her.
Her pale and slender hand was trembling lightly. Even though she was the one who had requested it, she seemed to be nervous.
This was one of Firill's traits. Hence, if anything happened, I must protect her and guide her.
"Please excuse me, Princess Firill."
I had to afford her the proper respect since she was carrying herself as royalty here. I brought my lips to make contact with her hand.
In that instant, Firll's entire body shook. Just as I withdrew my lips, she started going limp starting from her hand.
I looked up slowly and made eye contact with the blushing Firill.
However, she deliberately came up with an ostentatious speech in order to prevent her dignity as princess from crumbling.
"—I, Firill Crest, Princess of the Principality of Erlia, hereby swear upon the souls of my great ancestors, to accept this contract and take Mononobe Yuu as my lawfully wedded husband."
"Huh...?"
I stared at Firill in shock, then she repeated it again, blushing even more intensely.
"With this, Mononobe-kun, you're now my husband. My prince."
"Prince—J-Just wait a sec!"
"Of course I'm not going to wait. Even though it was simplified ceremony, what just took place was indeed a wedding. Within the Principality, it is legally binding so long as it is witnessed by a member of royalty. On this occasion, since I myself am royalty, there's no problem at all."
Firill made a thumbs-up. I hastily stood up and asked:
"What, that's a huge problem! I was totally kept in the dark, so—"
"Objection overruled. This marriage was conducted and sworn in the name of royalty. Mononobe-kun, we are now husband and wife. This is a princess' decision, so no complaining."
Firill pressed her finger to my lips to stop me from speaking, then a smile appeared on her blushing face and she hugged me from the front.
"Fufu, mission accomplished!"
"F-Firill..."
My brain's processing power could not keep up with the sudden development and the sensation of her bust.

I did not know what to do—However, Firill released the railing that she had been holding onto for support and wrapped her arms around my back, hugging me tightly, making my heart pound nonstop.
This had nothing to do with marriage or whatever. I became aware that the option of letting go of Firill never existed in my heart.
Feeling Firill's body warmth, I was thinking perhaps it really was time to take responsibility, but she left my embrace as though she had noticed something.
"—Oh, looks like my time as a princess has ended."
Looking at the ground, she said in disappointment.
"Uh, what do you mean?"
Unable to comprehend the situation, I asked.
"Now that we have crossed the mountain range, this isn't the Principality's airspace anymore. Since there isn't any contract of matrimony in writing, this marriage is only effective within the borders of the Principality. We are no longer husband and wife this moment, just classmates who are very close —Mononobe-kun. Sorry for scaring you."
Firill explained with a faint smile.
"Oh I see... You really scared me to death."
I relaxed my shoulders and exhaled deeply. Was this actually relief or dashed hopes? Even I myself could not tell.
"I wanted to make my dream come true before the next battle against Bahamut. Having a wedding after the battle felt like it'd be a dangerous flag to raise."
Firill spoke with a wry smile, but at that moment, she switched to a solemn expression and held my hand.
"However, what I said earlier was no joke. The fact that we are married in the Principality of Erlia, Mononobe-kun, is the truth, okay?"
Saying that, she raised my hand and slowly brought it close to her face.
She pressed her cherry lips against the back of my hand. Surprising me with the soft and slightly moist sensation, Firill looked up at me and smiled mischievously.
"Until the next time we visit the Principality, this secret is between only me and you, Mononobe-kun."
Then she left me and walked to the hatch.
Frozen, I watched her walking away, but just before entering the ship, she turned around and pointed at me strictly with her finger.
"Divorce or similar words are forbidden—My prince."

Part 2

NIFL's second defense line deployed across the waters of Norway was greater in scale than I imagined.
Around Marduk, which had landed on the sea, the fleet formed a line stretching from one end of the horizon to the other.
From the sky earlier, I had spotted aircraft carriers in the back too. It was probably from there that recon planes had been launched across the sky.
It would be no exaggeration to say that all of NIFL's remaining forces had gathered here. If the enemy broke past here, there would be no way to "protect humanity," hence this arrangement was only natural. My current location was in fact the final defense line.
And right now, Marduk and the battleship *Naglfar* moored close by were in a discussion about the key points of this operation.
"—2nd Lieutenant Mononobe, can I trust in you?"
Standing on the deck of the *Naglfar*, Major Loki asked me in a deep voice.
Side by side, the two battleships were separated by a distance of roughly ten meters. On the edge of each battleship's deck, it was possible to convey our voices to the other side.
"Yes. Just as mentioned in the previous report, Iris has figured out the location of her authority. This time, she should be able to unleash Catastrophe on a scale required to vanquish Bahamut in one go."
"Fine, but that is not the point I am doubting. What worries me is another matter. The third eye's range is ten thousand meters—Comparable to Bahamut's body length. In other words, it is necessary to launch the attack at point blank range. Delivering her to that position would be your responsibility. What I am asking is whether you have the resolve for that."
Major Loki shook his head and stared intently at me.
The strategy meeting had concluded already. Back when we were gathered at the bridge, Iris and Vritra had said the following through the monitor.
'—I've located my authority. If I close my eyes and focus my mind on my eyes, I can feel a red light in the eye on the right. Basilisk's power is in my right eye.'
'I too have confirmed that her right eye hath exhibited a faint red glow. Currently, she ought to be capable of drawing out the power consciously. Nevertheless, firing Catastrophe directly implieth she must approach the target. The trick of generating dark matter next to the enemy and transmuting it into Catastrophe is no longer an option, understood?'

What Major Loki brought up was the issue that Vritra had raised.
In any case, we had devised the operation in spite of the risks because "there was no other way," but after the meeting, Major Loki had called me out to the deck.
It seemed like he wanted to confirm my resolve prior to the operation.
"Of course I'll be able to do it for sure. With Catastrophe, Marduk's weaponry and the Ds' powers—Getting close to Bahamut is very feasible."
"—Thanks."
I saluted Major Loki with military etiquette.
The operation that was about to start was very simple. Charge Bahamut head on and fire Catastrophe once we got close. Bahamut should have already deemed Iris and Marduk as high-priority enemies, so feints were pointless. Consequently, the approach with the highest chance of success was breaking through from the front with maximum force while conducting a saturation attack. The machine intellect Atla had also reached the same conclusion.
"I am counting on your side. In the previous engagement, our gravity cannon Babel was effective against Bahamut. The special ICBM Cocytus—Gáe Bolg with its payload replaced by cryogens—has also demonstrated effectiveness to some extent. We should be able to slow down Bahamut's movements."
Smiling confidently, Major Loki nodded and looked towards the prow—Bahamut was approaching from the northern sky.
"Probability of victory is definitely not low. No, considering the opponent is a dragon, this probability of victory might be too high. During this batttle, a means of victory was in our hands all along. This is very worth celebrating, but to me, it is a little offputting."
"...Major Loki, do you think this might be a trap?"
When I frowned and asked, he shrugged lightly.
"I didn't say that. Judging from Bahamut's actions, it doesn't have high intelligence. However, I am more wary of its actions and accompanying phenomena more than Bahamut itself. Why is it connecting the unknown territories? And why does its shadow turn into additional unknown territory? Right now, we still have no idea."
"Yeah... It bothers me a lot too."
Defeating Bahamut would not be the end of it, I told myself.
"Indeed, take care not to be caught unprepared. That being said, you have no cause to worry, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe. All this time, you have been overturning the impossible. For us to be like this, or standing face to face, would've been impossible originally."
Turning his gaze back to me, Major Loki stared intently. I could not tell what he was thinking from his expression. Which side would die, or a case of mutual annihilation—The outcome of that battle was virtually preordained. It was definitely a miracle that we both survived. However...

"…It was not my own power. Kili was the one who healed you, Major Loki, and perhaps it was due to Atla that we both survived."
"Due to Atla?"
Showing complete surprise on his face, Major Loki repeated my words.
It was my first time seeing such a look on him, so I continued somewhat delightedly.
"Back then, when your plan failed, Major Loki, the *Naglfar* on the sea fired its main cannon at the break of dawn. However, now that I think about it, judging from the firepower, the intention was not to destroy Midgard."
While Ariella was using a gigantic shield to defend against the *Naglfar*'s main cannon, Tia had hacked the ship to stop its attack.
The cannon was powerful, but I had doubts whether it could have destroy Midgard completely.
"From what I saw today, Atla seems to regard you with much affection, Major Loki. So back then, she might have hesitated in fear of getting you caught in the blast in case you were still alive."
At that moment, a muffled voice snarled from Major Loki's chest pocket.
"Wh__ nonsense ___ you _____!?"
"Atla denies it. Wishful thinking on your part, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe."
Major Loki tapped his pocket which probably contained his portable terminal while replying in a surprised tone of voice.
"True, I don't have concrete evidence so I could be wrong. But don't you think the impossible might've been overturned by something so ordinary?"
While nodding, I looked back into his eyes forcefully.
"—Well, I cannot deny this possibility. The impossible for you and me could be something very simple for someone else, somewhere. It is true that Atla saved me. In that case, I should thank her."
Major Loki smiled with amusement and turned away. The noisy voice coming from his pocket suddenly stopped as though in shock.
"In any case, I now know the reason I lost last time. Sure enough, talking to you is very interesting."
"Interesting... huh?"
I muttered with mixed feelings. On my end, chills were running down my spine and I was breaking out in cold sweat.
"Yes, though of course, us trying to kill each other fills me with greater elation."
Leaving behind a gaze and words that felt like they could freeze my back, Major Loki returned inside the *Naglfar*.
"I really... don't want another go at that."
Left alone, I grumbled with a sigh, but my voice was lost in the wind. Amid the noise of waves and airplanes, my words did not reach anyone.

Part 3

'Bahamut approaching combat airspace. No change in flight speed. The operation will commence as planned.'
"Understood. Marduk, enter launch mode."
Hearing Jeanne's report over the communicator, I issued a command to the ship mentally.
—Main engine, ignite. Engage drive transmission. All systems normal. Deploy main wings. Activate gravitational control devices. Commence hovering.
As Marduk rumbled, the surrounding seawater gradually sank down. Standing on the deck of the slowly rising Marduk, I looked port side. Roughly a hundred meters away on the sea, the *Naglfar* also deployed its main wings.
The other side apparently possessed flight capability too, which was presumably how it had the mobility to evade Bahamut's attacks. However, the *Naglfar*'s main wings seemed to be flywheel-mounted and perhaps had not replicated the gravitational control devices.
"All units, the operation will begin five minutes from now. Are you ready?"
Standing on the deck, I asked the girls in front of me.
Although the distribution of roles was the same as in the previous battle, the outside combat team was assembled on the deck. Since Marduk was going to charge at maximum atmospheric flight speed later, they would be left behind the moment they separated from the ship. Hence, all of them were on the deck to participate in offense and defense.
"Yeah, no problem. I've figured out my authority, so it'll work this time. And you're here too, Mononobe—I won't be afraid of turning into a dragon."
After Iris responded firmly, the others also nodded.
"We are fine too. However, something unrelated to the operation has been bothering me a while now."
Lisa looked at me suggestively, prompting Ariella and Ren to shift their gazes in surprise.
"I think I've got the same question on my mind too."
"Mm, me too."
Next, Kili looked at me with eyes of displeasure.
"Hey you, haven't you been staying too close to Yuu since earlier?"
"Eh, me?"
She was referring to Firill, who was standing next to me.

Indeed, I was very conscious of it too. As soon as we assembled on the deck, Firill had been sticking close to me.
Her matter-of-fact expression made it impossible for me to say anything, but the others apparently reached the end of their patience.
"What's the problem? It's not like we're arm in arm or hugging, right?"
Firill cocked her head in puzzlement. Seeing Firill's response, Lisa frowned in a dilemma.
"Even so, you are still standing too close to him. It is unnatural no matter how I look at it."
"There's nothing unnatural. This is a very natural distance for me and Mononobe-kun. Don't you agree...?"
After answering calmly, Firill looked up at me.
"No, well, even if you ask me, I suppose?"
Unable to understand her behavior, I gave a vague answer. This made Firill pout mildly as she grabbed my arm.
Just as I leaned over slightly, she drew her face near and whispered in my ear.
"...We are newlyweds, Mononobe-kun. This kind of distance is very normal."
"Uh—"
Firill's breath and words were making my face heat up. Feeling the piercing stares from the rest of the girls, I answered quietly.
"B-But that's within the Principality, and didn't you say to keep it a secret from everyone?"
"Yes, that's right. But the newlywed aura between us is unstoppable. For me right now, this is the natural distance. So do your best, Mononobe-kun, and keep them in the dark."
Blushing, Firill replied with a serious expression.
While we were conversing in whispers, Iris tugged at my uniform from behind.
"What are you talking about, Mononobe and Firill-chan? Why do you have to whisper?"
"W-Well, it's because—"
Racking my brain furiously, I wondered how to deceive the rest of the girls.
"Just now when we were flying over the Principality of Erlia, the subject of protecting this place came up in our conversation, so—It felt like cooperating with our hearts as one, we became closer, something like that..."
When I struggled to explain, Firill interjected after asking me to do my best earlier.
"That's right, Mononobe-kun and I are now in this together, thick and thin. We'll protect *our country*. Like this—Hip hip hurray!"
Grabbing my hand, Firill raised her hand with full vigor.
The subtle emphasis in her statement made me panic, but Iris imitated us, apparently accepting the explanation.
"That's right! Of course I'll do my best too. Hip, hip, hurray!"

She raised her fist high.
Doubt remained on the others' faces, but they tensed their expressions after hearing the latest update through their communicators.
'Three minutes until the operation. Cocytus has been fired from a distant base. Combat team outside the ship, please deploy barriers from the deck and standby to attack.'
"—Affirmative. Gungnir!"
Lisa began to construct her fictional armament and the others also readied themselves for combat.
"Aegis—Deploy barrier."
Ariella erected an air barrier while Ren raised her hammer fictional armament.
"Mm, Mjolnir."
After summoning her grimoire fictional armament, Firill smiled at me.
"...Necronomicon. Mononobe-kun, I absolutely refuse to lose anything."
The pages of the book flipped noisily, blowing a mild gust of wind in our surroundings. This was probably to strengthen the air barrier.
Without using a fictional armament, Kili walked to the center of the deck and said quietly.
"—Muspelheim. To prevent Bahamut from spotting Iris-chan, I will use refraction of light to make it impossible to see us from outside."
There was no visible change. However, tiny particles of dark matter, too small for the naked eye to discern, had generated in the surrounding space to deploy optical camouflage.
'Do your best, everyone!'
I heard Tia's voice over the communicator. Next, Mitsuki and Shion's voices also reached my ear.
'Nii-san, everyone, I will be watching over you all from the bridge. If a situation should arise, I will rush over instantly to support you.'
'mE toO, i'Ll hElp Papa aNd eVeryOne iF anYthiNg haPpEns. hiP HiP huRrAy!'
Shion's imitation of Iris and Firill earlier made me smile.
"Yeah—Thanks a lot. Iris, are you ready?"
"Yes, no problem. Look."
When I asked, Iris nodded and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, her right eye was already crimson like a ruby. A short while later, her left eye also started glowing red.
"Caduceus!"
Iris cried out sharply and her staff fictional armament manifested. Up to this point, it was the same as usual.
However, the fictional armament began to materialize, covering its surface with a layer of red diamond scales. Next, an ominous red sphere appeared on the tip of the staff.

I had seen this once before. It was the "organ" for producing maximum firepower that Iris had used when she became infinitesimally close to being a dragon during the showdown against the rampaging Kraken Zwei.
"—Third Eye of Catastrophe!"
As Iris called out, the red sphere split open to reveal a giant eyeball. Like Iris' own eyes, the eyeball was glowing with crimson light too.
This was the third eye that Iris had created. In order to maximize Catastrophe's beam, this was the trump card for eliminating Bahamut.
"Mononobe… It worked. I will fight."
Although Iris was smiling assertively, I could see scales slightly invading her hand that was holding the staff. It was possible to turn her back, but I still felt a bit worried. However, since she had demonstrated her resolve, I could not show weakness either.
"Yeah, Iris—I'm leaving you the job of delivering the fatal blow to Bahamut. We'll create the opportunity for you to launch this attack."
I nodded at Iris and looked at everyone in turn.
"When Basilisk used the third eye to fire Catastrophe, it required a recharge period before attacking again. Assuming it's the same for Iris, we can't have her firing arbitrarily. We will be the ones to handle Bahamut's attacks.
"Yes, of course. We shan't allow Iris-san to be troubled."
Lisa asserted strongly and raised her spear fictional armament. Once everyone was ready, Shinomiya-sensei spoke through the communicator.
'—As discussed during the strategy meeting, we have now confirmed two of Bahamut's attack methods. There is the heat beam discharged from the mouth as well as the firing of missile-like projectiles. Since the *Naglfar* managed to neutralize the heat beam by using Babel, our ship should be able to do the same. However, it is possible for Bahamut to have other aces up its sleeve. Do not be careless under any circumstances.'
"Yes ma'am."
After I replied, Shinomiya-sensei continued.
'Furthermore, optical weapons such as lasers will end up absorbed as energy before striking the target. Although point-blank explosions are able to inflict damage, the heat generated in the blasts will turn into Bahamut's nourishment, activating its metabolic functions. Please commit these two points to your memory and react flexibly. Well then—There are only thirty seconds left. The countdown will commence presently.'
The atmosphere grew tense. I stared at the northern sky.
Bahamut was not in sight yet, but we should be able to see it with a slight increase in altitude. That was how close our enemy was.
I increased the output of the main engine and waited for the moment to arrive. I could also hear the sound of the *Naglfar* revving up to high energy while hovering at the same height.
'Begin countdown—Nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one—'
An ICBM flew over in the sky. The instant it disappeared on the other side of the horizon, the start of the operation was declared.

'—Zero!'
"Main thrusters, ignite! Full speed ahead!"
With my acute shout, Marduk began to advance. The G-forces from acceleration pressed down all over my body, but the barrier of wind enveloping the deck was supporting all of us.
The missiles fired by the fleet at the second defense line were flying in front nearby.
The clouds flew back violently and the blue horizon was dyed white. Over the there, seawater was being frozen. And in the sky, a giant shadow was hovering.
'Target confirmed through optical imaging devices. ICBM right on target.'
After Jeanne's report, the ten-thousand-meter-long giant figure was surrounded by white mist from the blast. These white clouds were probably produced from the dispersing cryogens. The Cocytus modified from Gáe Bolg must have smashed into Bahamut's body and exploded without fail.
'All missiles met their mark. Bahamut's surface temperature dropping, but core energy still very high.'
This was like trying to put out a fire with cups of water, but no matter how slight the effect, it was still working. Furthermore, the first strike's objective was to obscure Bahamut's line of sight using the mist from the blast, to delay its discovery of us for as long as possible.
Bahamut emerged again, breaking through the white clouds produced by the cryogens. Marduk used this opportunity to close in according to the plan. Only thirty kilometers remained between us.
Flying next to us, the *Naglfar* was slightly ahead and fired a missile. This was to divert Bahamut's attention, no matter how little. Resembling Marduk in appearance, perhaps the *Naglfar* flying side by side could confuse Bahamut as a decoy.
'Bahamut has shot out multiple projectiles from its back! All targeting Marduk!'
But after hearing Jeanne's report, I knew the idea was too optimistic. Although Kili's optical camouflage should have prevented it from discovering Iris, Bahamut correctly identified the location of its natural enemy.
'High-energy reaction detected from Bahamut's head! Please take precautions against its heat beam!'
Even though we were fairly far away, I still could sense the brightness from Bahamut's mouth. The flying projectiles numbered two hundred. If they were to split up in the air, the quantity would be multiplied.
"Too many—Even if Mononobe-kun reduced their number like last time, they still might be too much to handle. Should I deploy a physical barrier?" Ariella asked anxiously. The approaching projectiles looked like black stars in the blue sky.
However, I shook my head and looked at Bahamut, which was about to fire its heat beam.

"No, we'll *blow them all away* from this distance. Leave it to me."
Last time, Bahamut was very close and the approaching projectiles were almost flying at us from above, so I could only intercept them using Abyss. But this time, they were along *the main cannon's line of fire*.
"Babel—Maximum output."
I infused the main cannon at the prow with energy. The lenses in the middle of the bifurcated barrel glowed with blinding light while a deep rumble resounded in the surroundings.
Until now, I had always used Marduk's weapons in independent isolation to defeat dragons, but using them that way was really overdoing it. The main cannon and the special artillery would self-destruct after a single shot, while the other weaponry also fared poorly in stability. In other words, I had not been able to draw out their full capabilities.
But this time was different.
"Energy critical. Target, the fifth dragon—'Eternal Longevity' Bahamut."
Plasma appeared between the lenses in the barrel and the noise of activation grew loud.
Directly connected to Marduk's engine, the main cannon was able to exhibit 100% firepower. Using the main cannon in isolation could not compare to this at all.
The same time as Bahamut released its heat beam, I yelled:
"—Fire!!"
The beam of black light shot from the bifurcated barrel devoured all approaching projectiles, neutralized the heat beam, and directly struck Bahamut in the distance.
Due to the spatial discontinuity created by supergravity, a pitch-black band distorted the path of light rays. From the ship's perspective, there were unnatural cracks in the surrounding scenery. Seawater swirled up against the Earth's gravity, sucked into the black light together with clouds.
It looked as though the world itself had shattered.
Bahamut's entire body discharged blue flames, trying to escape the gravitational discontinuity, but enveloped by the black beam, the right side of its body was caught, folded, and gouged out.
"So amazing..."
Next to me, Iris sighed in awe.
"Nothing less expected of Atlantis' trump card."
Kili whispered poignantly too.
Indeed, Deus Dragon Marduk was the power of the the second dragon —"Ultimate Wisdom" Atlantis itself. In other words, it was a "true dragon" on the same level as Bahamut. Even in a direct confrontation, it would give its opponent a good run for its money.
After the black light vanished, Bahamut began to fall towards the frozen sea surface, having lost one third of its body size.
"Mononobe, don't tell me we already defeated it?"

Standing at the prow, Iris looked back and asked, but I smiled wryly in return.
"That would be great, but Bahamut is too big. Unless we annihilate it in one shot, it'll immediately—"
Before I could finish, Bahamut's body began to regenerate at an unbelievable rate. In mere seconds, Bahamut had already restored its original shape.
Although I knew Bahamut's rate of metabolism was enough to oppose the incomplete Catastrophe, after witnessing it with my very own eyes, a chill and cold sweat still spread across my back. Even if Marduk held the upper hand for now, winning was definitely out of the question. That was the kind of opponent we were facing.
—The only way to destroy Bahamut was to rely on Iris' authority. It would be wishful fantasy to think I could win.
Reaffirming my role, I maintained Marduk's top atmospheric flight speed. This attack from the main cannon had bought us plenty of time. Closing in further on Bahamut, we still had roughly twenty kilometers to go.
Finished regenerating, Bahamut discharged flames from all over its body, looking like it had renewed its stance.
At that moment, flying next to us, the *Naglfar* released a black beam. It was the Babel Replica—a weapon that was a copy of Marduk's main cannon. Its firepower was somewhat lower than the original, but the attack damaged Bahamut's wings, causing it to fall again.
Just as Bahamut finished regenerating again, it was bathed under the second wave of attacks from the NIFL fleet behind us. The white mist from the explosion surrounded Bahamut, obscuring it from sight.
Depriving Bahamut of heat would at least slow down its regeneration rate. We could not stand idle either.
"—The main cannon cannot be fired again until the barrel cools down and the energy is recharged. I will attack with other weapons. Everyone, support me using cryogens!"
"Mm, got it. Aiming from this distance is quite hard, so spread it over a large area."
Ren was the first to nod and raise her hammer fictional armament.
Next, dark matter appeared over her head, transmuting into a white sphere. It was probably a mass of cryogenic substance.
"Mm!"
When Ren swung her fictional armament, the sphere shot out at high speed, exploding over Bahamut. The cryogenic substance rained down, further increasing the density of the white mist enveloping Bahamut.
"We're on it too!"
Ariella and the others followed up with more cryogens after Ren. While watching them, I transmitted my thoughts to Marduk's eight psionic multi-barreled cannons.

Using the coordinates shared by Jeanne to aim, Bahamut was accurately located amid the white mist—Locked on.
On top of the deck, the turrets installed at the front of Marduk swiveled and took aim at the target.
"Psionic multi-barreled cannons, Noah—Fire!"
Manifestations of mental energy, shells were shot simultaneously from all turrets. Through Marduk's system, my mental energy was greatly amplified. The rapid depletion of mental energy in the past was no longer a worry.
Leaving brightly glowing trails, the shells of light hurtled into the white mist, resulting in heavy sounds of impact.
—Confirmed hit on target. Reload.
According to information from Jeanne, the psionic multi-barreled cannons had definitely inflicted damage upon Bahamut. Then all I needed to do was follow up the attacks.
Accompanying massive explosions caused by firing special artillery, the shells formed from my mental energy were shot into the air again.
The warheads of Abyss were limited, hence they had to be saved for the right moment.
"Crash down, ice blade!"
Lisa and the others continued to spread cryogenic substances. Ten more kilometers left. Soon enough—
'Bahamut's surface temperature rising rapidly! Perhaps it is releasing energy from within! Beware!'
Before we could brace ourselves after hearing Jeanne's urgent voice, the white mist surrounding Bahamut was blown away completely.
The frozen sea surface instantly melted while a wave of shock and heat rushed towards us.
The battleship shook while the temperature on the deck began to rise in spite of the barrier protecting us. While sweating, I gasped at the sight of Bahamut's change in appearance.
Red lines resembling veins had appeared on its black surface while the flames spewing out from its body were even more intense. The missiles from NIFL and attacks from Ren and the girls were getting vaporized before they could reach the target.
However, the sea instantly froze again when Bahamut opened its jaws wide and inhaled. Glittering diamond dust also appeared in the atmosphere.
'The air temperature around the hovering Bahamut is dropping again—Yet Bahamut's surface temperature continues to rise. The outer surface is expanding... No, transforming—'
Already right in front of us, Bahamut's cataclysmic change was clear for us to see.
Bahamut's body expanded with several bizarre protrusions appearing.
"Are those... horns?"
Firill murmured but a different answer came over the communicator.

'No—Bahamut is showing a high-energy reaction inside! Those are probably *turrets*! Warning signs of projectiles about to be fired from Bahamut's back!'
Hearing Jeanne's report, Kili's expression turned grim.
"Turrets and missiles... Weapons similar to what we have?"
After she whispered, Bahamut shot out numerous projectiles.
'Fired projectiles confirmed! Quantity... Twenty or so! In addition to our ship, the *Naglfar* and the NILF forces behind us are also targeted. Also confirmed, Bahamut's oral cavity and the turrets are rising in temperature! The heat beam and artillery are coming!'
"What do we do!? There's no way to shoot them all down, right?"
Staring at the trajectory of the projectiles in the air, Kili asked.
—Just as Kili had pointed out, intercepting them would be very difficult. The main cannon was not recharged yet. Catastrophe should be capable of eliminating everything in one go, but firing it would be too soon right now.
'Captain, message from the *Naglfar*. "Never mind us," apparently!'
Without time to think deeply, I confirmed the situation and made my decision.
"Hmm—Charge ahead using defensive armaments. Girls, fortify the air barrier."
As I said that, Marduk shot out small units from beneath, deploying them in its surroundings.
Marduk still had other armaments I could use independently, this was one of them. Since there were restrictions on number of uses and active duration, and the fact that there was no data indicating it could defend against Bahamut's attacks, I had kept it in reserve until now. However, with only a few kilometers left, it was probably fine to take a gamble.
"Light shell barrier—Eden!"
I confirmed the placement of the units and shouted out the name.
Next, the units linked up using beams of light, forming a polyhedron that surrounded Marduk. With light beams as the framework, a glowing barrier enveloped the battleship.
"Wind!"
Lisa and the others generated several layers of air barriers inside. Although we could no longer attack in this state, the barriers would allow us to ignore the enemy's attacks.
'Incoming heat beam and the artillery shells!'
Bahamut released flaming orbs from all over its body while discharging a massive heat beam from its mouth. The line-of-sight attack arrived faster than the parabolic trajectory of the projectile, striking Marduk.
The barrier instantly turned pure white. However, the heat was completely blocked and I did not feel any rise in temperature.
Due to the bright light, the naked eye could not see anything, but the barrier was stopping all attacks.
Using Marduk's recon functionality, Jeanne did not lose Bahamut's location.

While the barrier was deployed, Marduk was also charging into the heat beam at maximum speed.
Flames continued to explode outside the barrier. One of the axis units was emitting a mild amount of sparks, probably struck directly by the hail of projectiles. Slightly later, a series of explosions occurred directly above the battleship, presumably due to the detonation of projectiles. I did not know how powerful it was exactly, but the increased burden caused one of the barrier units to explode internally. I instantly reassigned another unit to cover the gap, but minor cracks appeared in the light shell.
Bahamut had most likely gone all-out in this attack. There was no reason to hold back against its natural enemy.
—Hang in there a while longer!
'We are about to close in on Bahamut!'
Hearing Jeanne's voice, I yelled:
"Iris, attack as soon as you get the signal!"
"Yes!"
Answering loudly, Iris pointed her staff to the front. Merged with the staff, the third eye glowed red.
"Come, come, fragments of termination—"
While Iris was chanting, our distance to Bahamut was shrinking fast. Through my senses, I kept up-to-date the location of the giant approaching entity.
—Less than a thousand meters. Seven hundred meters—Five hundred meters—Three hundred meters—
The instant we broke a hundred meters, I shouted to Iris:
"Now!"
"O Catastrophe, actualize!!"
Accompanied by Iris' shrill voice, the third eye shot out a torrent of red light.
Stealing time from all creation, the shining light of destruction passed through the barrier in front of the ship and erased the incoming heat beam. The instant I saw the Bahamut approaching the red light so extremely close, I was convinced of victory. However, the instant before Catastrophe reached its target, something blocked in front of Bahamut.
"What—"
Inconceivable. A silver discus had suddenly appeared before Bahamut to block Catastrophe.
"Mononobe... Oh no—That discus isn't showing signs of weathering at all! At this rate, I won't be able to hit Bahamut!"
Iris' urgent voice cleared my mind. At this rate, this was turning into a direct confrontation against the discus!
"Gah—Emergency turn! Hard right!"
Firing the auxiliary thruster on port side, I forcibly altered Marduk's course. The discus also moved as though it was the shield to protect Bahamut and continued to defend against Iris' Catastrophe.

In that case, steering Marduk to Bahamut's right flank was not going to help.
At that moment, Iris reached her limit. The instant the third eye's beam ended, the outer edge of the discus suddenly dispersed to reveal ribbon-like tentacles to attack Marduk.
—Boom!!
Accompanied by a heavy crash and impact, Marduk shook violently.
'Barrier penetrated! But no direct hit! Damage minimal!'
Although the attack breached the already damaged light shell on port side, thanks to the air barrier maintained by the girls, we had avoided a direct hit. However, next time was not going to be so lucky.
"Kyah!"
Losing balance, Iris and the girls fell over. At the same time, I fired the two special artillery without aiming.
"Megiddo—Fire!"
The explosion would turn into Bahamut's energy source, but there was no time to worry about that right now. In any case, it was imperative to restrain the unidentified discus.
The two shells of blue light shot out from the turrets produced a massive explosion in the air. The blast wind and the shockwave blew away the discus that was about to follow up on its attack.
Seizing this opportunity, Marduk secured distance against the enemy and took a wide turn. Aiming the psionic multi-barreled cannons at Bahamut and the discus, I fired shells of mental energy from the eight turrets.
The shells failed to hit the rapidly moving discus, but a few continued to pare down Bahamut's body that was damaged from the earlier explosion.
The only way to restrain Bahamut and its extremely rapid regeneration was to continue inflicting damage to it. If we could stall for long enough, the main cannon could be fired too. But—
"What the heck is that discus!? It suddenly showed up and blocked Catastrophe..."
Fallen over and crouching, Kili cried out unhappily.
The same question was on everyone's mind, but the answer was instantly revealed to us.
'Tia knows! It's in the Akashic Record. The sixth dragon—'Anomalous Dawn' Nyarlathotep!'
While continuing to fire shells of mental energy, I gasped because of Tia's revelation. Following the Bahamut the fifth dragon, the sixth dragon had appeared too, why on earth...?
At that moment, a low and sharp voice entered my ear.
'From Bahamut's shadow, inside the unknown territory.'
"—Major Loki?"
I exclaimed the name of the voice's owner in surprise.
'Apologies, due to the urgency of the situation, I had Atla patch me directly into your communications channel. The *Naglfar* captured the instant of the

discus' appearance. It definitely flew out of the unknown territory. *Just like Bahamut*.'
I looked around and found the *Naglfar* on the other side of Bahamut. The *Naglfar* must have steered in the opposite direction from us. It had struck the discus with missiles while surrounding Bahamut with a cloud of cryogenic substance. This was probably done to buy time for us to regroup.
"Just like Bahamut..."
'Indeed—But in that case, it should have appeared during the previous battle. According to Atla, it is very likely that the discus had been lurking in the Arctic unknown territory.'
"Hmm... Could it be that inside the four unknown territories—"
Hit by an ominous hunch, I spoke hoarsely.
'Indeed. Perhaps different dragons are lurking in them. However, we must first take care of the enemy before us. According to Atla's analysis, the discus is made of a material similar to mithril. No, since we detected virtually no degradation caused by Catastrophe, its durability must exceed mithril's. So long as that thing remains in the way, Catastrophe will not never hit Bahamut.'
After Major Loki spoke gravely, Ariella whispered from the side:
"Mithril... Speaking of which, that discus has similarities with the Kraken. It's able to extend tentacles."
Possibly hearing this, Tia spoke through the communicator.
'The Kraken was the counterdragon that evolved to defeat Nyarlathotep. It was probably during that process that it developed a similar appearance.'
"Wait—Then the Kraken's authority... We should be able to defeat Nyarlathotep with antimatter, right?"
I asked Tia solemnly.
'Yes, probably. Or rather... Apart from antimatter, there is definitely no other way of defeating it. Nyarlathotep is a metallic lifeform with no concept of lifespan—'
'Then Nii-san, allow me to fight.'
A voice filled with determination interrupted Tia on the communicator.
"Mitsuki..."
Indeed, Mitsuki's power to generate antimatter was needed here. Although I was worried about bringing her outside the ship, there was no other way.
Just as I was about to consent—A young voice interjected, speaking awkwardly.
'Papa, wAit. i caN uSe anTiMatTer tOo. nO... i Am thE onLy One wHo caN uSe iT riGht.'
"What—Shion, you're going to fight too?"
I asked in confusion. Through the communicator, I heard Jeanne go "Zwei—What are you suddenly talking about!?" in a panic.
'yEs. mY auThOrity iS strOngEr. i KnOw.'
'H-Hold on! It would be too dangerous to let Shion-san fight!'
Mitsuki cried out anxiously.

'Time is running out, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe. Due to the attack just now, Bahamut must have used up a great deal of its internal energy, slowing its rate of regeneration, but... Soon enough, it will finish its recovery and counterattack us.'
Major Loki urged me sharply to make a decision.
"—"
I gnashed my teeth and racked my brain momentarily before speaking.
"Shion, come to the deck."
'yEs! Papa, riGht awAy!'
'Nii-san...'
Shion replied happily, but Mitsuki called my name in protest.
"Sorry. Now that an unexpected situation has come up, I can't recklessly allow you to go out, Mitsuki."
Thinking that Neun's instinct must be driving me to prioritize Mitsuki's protection, I apologized.
'—Understood. I shall comply with your decision, Nii-san.'
The sad voice caused agony to grip my heart, but for the sake of handling the crisis at hand, I could only suppress my own feelings while asking Iris who was sitting at the prow.
"Iris, you can't use the third eye immediately, right?"
"...S-Sorry. But... I've rested a bit while everyone was talking. Just a bit longer and... Once we get near Bahamut again, I should be able to... No, I'll definitely be able to."
Holding the staff with the glowing red eyeball, she stood up unsteadily.
"I got it."
I nodded without hesitation and changed Marduk's course, putting Bahamut and Nyarlathotep directly before the ship—along the main cannon's line of fire.
Although the *Naglfar* continued to attack using its main cannon and cryogenic projectiles, Bahamut's regeneration was probably nearing completion. Hence, I must do it before then.
"Main cannon, Babel—Psionic multi-barreled cannons, Noah—Hyperspace reversion rocket-assisted artillery, Abyss—"
I linked my mind to these three sets of armaments and locked onto the targets. The main cannon rumbled while the lenses in the middle of the barrel glowed. The other weapons also produced deep noises of operation while waiting for the moment to unleash their power.
This was the decisive strike. There was no need to hold back.
"—Full Burst!!"
A black torrent shot out from the main cannon at the prow while the eight multi-barreled cannons fired shells of light. All remaining missiles were launched simultaneously from the pods at the back of Marduk, leaving white trails in the sky.
The silver discus—Nyarlathotep—immediately reacted, blocking the main cannon head on. Caught in the gravitational discontinuity, the discus'

outline became twisted. But unbelievably, its silver body returned to its original round shape afterwards.
Impenetrable even by the main cannon... What outrageous resilience.
Nyarlathotep's durability was sickening, but my attacks were certainly not limited to just one.
While Nyarlathotep was blocking the main cannon, Noah's shells and Abyss' warheads had struck Bahamut directly.
Gouged by holes of hyperspace all over its body, the giant dragon's size was dramatically reduced.
"Now is the time—Another charge! Double deployment of Eden at the prow!"
Almost all of the barrier-generating units were overloaded, leaving only six functional. Covering the entire ship was impossible, so I erected a double layer of triangular surfaces of light in front of the ship.
"Lisa and Firill, fortify the air barrier! Ariella and Ren, you're in charge of transmuting physical barriers in response to enemy actions! Kili, defend the surface of the deck with everything you've got."
"Affirmative!"
After the girls replied, Shion opened the hatch and rushed outside.
"Papa! i wiLl taKe oUt thaT roUnd tHiNg."
"—Great, Shion. I'm counting on you. Let's fight side by side."
Picking up the running Shion in my arms, I ordered Marduk to enter maximum acceleration.
At maximum output, the thrusters propelled the ship at full speed.
Resisting the gravity cannon, Nyarlathotep noticed our actions and extended ribbon-like tentacles.
"i wOn'T loSe tO yoU..."
Shion lifted her hair to reveal the hidden left eye. Her eye was glowing purple just as it had done so back when she was Kraken Zwei. She had apparently spoken the truth when talking about being able to use the authority earlier.
"...Come, come, fragments of termination—Come, come, fragments of termination..."
Holding the red staff with both hands, Iris repeated the same same chant as though praying. The third eye at the tip of the staff glowed crimson again.
'Captain, incoming!'
Nyarlathotep attacked at high speed almost simultaneously with Jeanne's warning. The instant the light barrier cracked, the units sustaining the first barrier overloaded and exploded.
Although the second barrier layer held, but by the time we verified the situation, the tentacles were already retracted. Just now was probably a purely physical attack performed by that super durable metallic entity at hyper speed. But this single strike was already extraordinary in power.
"It's going to break through next time! We need to construct a physical barrier capable of blocking that thing's attacks!"

"Mm."
Holding Ren's hand, Ariella took a step forward. She was planning to borrow dark matter from Ren to erect an even stronger barrier.
'Incoming again!!'
While Jeanne issued the warning, Ariella shouted:
"Barrier, deploy—Seras Athena!"
Dark matter was generated on the interior face of the light barrier.
Blooming like a flower, a silver-white shield was spreading out radially.
Immediately, a thunderous rumble was heard. The impact shook the ship, making us unsteady on our feet.
The remaining units were broken as the final light barrier was destroyed.
Cracks also appeared on Ariella's barrier with tiny fragments crumbling off.
However, the barrier was not penetrated. On the opposite side of the collapsing barrier, Nyarlathotep and Bahamut were right in front of us—
"Iris!"
"Yeah, I'm on it—Mononobe!"
When I gave the signal, Iris replied resolutely.
"Great... Shion, I'm counting on you!"
Under the current circumstances, Nyarlathotep could not move. As soon as it dodged, Bahamut would lose protection and suffer a direct hit.
"Papa, i gOt iT!"
Shion's hair suddenly flew up while blinding light erupted from her left eye.
This was the authority inherited from the Kraken, the power known as the "Absolute."
Regardless of the level of hardness or resilience, nothing could defend against this attack as long as it was matter.
Capable of annihilating all matter, glowing antimatter surged from Shion's left eye.
"diSapPeAr!"
Her young voice was filled with fighting spirit.
The purple glowing projectile exploded silently in the air.
A flash of light imprinted on my retinas.
The released beam struck the rotating Nyarlathotep dead center.
Immediately, the discus-like entity began to expand from within. A crack formed, leaking out light, then instantly—A violent explosion engulfed the discus.
It was disappearing. Thrashing its tentacles, the sixth calamity which had threatened the world in the past was gradually devoured by the purple light.
The massive explosion at point-blank range caused Bahamut to roar in pain.
The light of annihilation was also approaching us.
However—No need to fear. *She* was going to erase everything next.
"Now!"
"O Catastrophe, actualiiiiiiiiize!!"

Iris' stern voice resounded all around while the third eye's glow brightened from the tip of her raised staff.
Red light flooded out. The time-stealing torrent rushed at the matter-annihilating explosion and Bahamut that was on the other side.
The distant future—The termination of all creation.
"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"
Iris screamed with all her might.
Bathed in the red light, Bahamut also began to widen its jaws and roar.
Blue-white light appeared from inside its mouth that was even bigger than Marduk.
It was trying to use its last strength to fire a heat beam.
However, even when putting eternal longevity on the line, it was futile in the face of termination brought by Catastrophe.
The flames of massive heat were erased by the red beam of destruction.
The ten-thousand-meter-long body collapsed, crumbled, and the roaring ended.
The giant silhouette hovering in the reddened sky grew smaller and smaller.
With the karma of time catching up to it, the fifth dragon met its demise just like that.
This was probably a reenactment of the ancient past, when Basilisk had exterminated it—
"——Huff... Huff... Huff... We did... it?"
After Catastrophe's light vanished, Iris collapsed in exhaustion and sat down on the deck.
There was nothing left in front of Marduk.
Nyarlathotep, Bahamut, and even the clouds in the sky were all gone, leaving only a clear blue sky.
'Signals lost for Bahamut and Nyarlathotep. Mission... accomplished.'
Jeanne's voice through the communicator brought me back from spacing out.
"We did it!"
Close by, Firill jumped in delight.
Just as I was feeling flustered by the two soft bulges pressing against me, Shion imitated her and hugged me.
"Papa, i... woRkeD haRd, riGht?"
"Yeah, you worked really hard."
Patting her purple-haired head, I praised Shion and she happily closed her eyes partially. Her glowing left eye had returned to normal too.
"Mononobe... What about me...?"
Sitting utterly exhausted, Iris looked longingly at me. She had let go of her staff and the scales on her hand were starting to disappear. The red color in her eyes was also fading away gradually.
"Yeah, Iris, you certainly worked hard too!"
"...Was I amazing?"
I nodded hastily but Iris did not seem satisfied.

"Yeah, very amazing."
"Fufu… Mononobe praised me."
Then Iris finally relaxed completely and laid down with her back on the deck.
"Iris-chan, you'll catch a cold if you sleep here, you know?"
Kili sighed in exasperation and the others smiled wryly. The atmosphere was very harmonious—But a sharp voice suddenly spoke through the communicator.
'2nd Lieutenant Mononobe, get away from there immediately!'
"—Major Loki?"
Major Loki spoke rapidly, surprising me.
'Look down—Something is very unusual about the shadow! You are directly over the unknown territory!'
I rushed over to looked down from the deck. The trail left behind by Bahamut on the frozen sea surface had remained even after Bahamut's destruction. And continuing forward after defeating Bahamut, Marduk had entered the sky over the shadow.
Was it due to losing its original source, Bahamut? The unknown territory's surface expanded in a terrifying manner.
"!? Thrusters, maximum output! Withdraw ASAP!"
Feeling an intense chill, I tried to escape the unknown territory but it was too late. Surging out of the shadow, the darkness spurted up like a geyser, swallowing Marduk.
The sky and the sea turned black completely. The turbulent flow of darkness swallowed the deck. Everyone's figure—including my own outline—became indiscernible. Not only vision but all other senses became dulled too. Shion and Firill, who should be next to me, could not be located either.
"Damn it—"
I reached out in the darkness, trying to invoke Neun's authority.
The back of my left hand warmed up and the tiny dragon mark surfaced. I could finally see my left hand clearly.
However, the light did not spread further. When I looked around, there was blue light shining from various locations, probably the dragon marks of my companions. Like me, they were using Neun's power to resist the darkness.
However, the light was fading away. The excess abundance of darkness was about to overwhelm the authority's light.
Yesterday and during the car accident that killed Mitsuki's parents—I had confronted the darkness on two occasions and succeeded in suppressing it. But the volume was completely different this time.
The darkness was overwhelming and our light was too weak.
"Firill, Shion, are you there?"
I called out to the two girls who were supposed to be hugging me, but there was no answer.
"Iris, Kili!"

Then I called to the two girls who should have been second nearest to me, but sure enough, there was no response either.
"Lisa, Ariella, Ren! Answer me!"
The others on the deck did not respond either. However, I could not give up. This time, I called out to people who should be at the bridge.
"Jeanne, what is the situation at the bridge? Shinomiya-sensei, are you okay? Mitsuki, Tia, Vritra—"
"Yes, I am here. Nii-san."
An answer. Just one person's.
However, this voice did not come through the communicator. It was from nearby, a voice reaching my ear directly.
"—Mitsuki, you're on the deck!?"
"...Yes. I was very worried about Shion-san, so I was staying by the hatch."
Unusually clear, Mitsuki's voice reached me.
"No—Hurry and go back! This darkness will surely get you, Mitsuki—"
"There is no place to run to. Furthermore, there is no need for me to be hiding away."
The instant I heard these confident words, a blinding light appeared amid the darkness.
It was a vivid blue light—The same as our glowing dragon marks. However, this light was strong enough to overpower the thick darkness.
Surrounded by light, Mitsuki was showing a dreamy smile.
"Mitsuki...?"
"Nii-san—I have the answers now. What exactly is Neun's authority? How exactly is Neun's authority used? Consequently, you can relax."
The blue light blew away the darkness—No, it swallowed the darkness whole.
The intense light forced me to close my eyes. By the time I opened them again... The world had regained its original color.
"What... happened?"
With a look as though she had suddenly woken up from a nightmare, Lisa murmured. The others checked their own limbs but very quickly, all gazes gathered upon Mitsuki who was standing on the deck.
"It is wonderful that all of you are fine."
Taking on everyone's gaze, Mitsuki smiled with some weariness.
'—All sensors back to normal. Captain... The unknown territory has vanished. Including the domes at the American west coast and the Arctic, as well as the shadow traced out by Bahamut, all of it—'
I heard Jeanne's shocked voice over the communicator.
Under the rays of the sun shining from the sky above, projected on the deck, Mitsuki's shadow deepened and intensified—

Epilogue

Part 1

"Neun—My comrade. Owing to thy sister, two locations of darkness have vanished from Gaia. 'Twould be a major step of progress."
Vritra's long hair swayed while she was speaking to me.
Standing on the deck with the sea breeze blowing, I looked into her eyes and nodded.
"Yeah. Well, it's a great relief to hear that the people inside the unknown territories are safe and sound. Dispelling the darkness is enough to rescue them—Learning this fact is already a major breakthrough."
Our location was roughly ten kilometers south of where we had defeated Bahamut. The surrounding seawater was not frozen and Marduk was moored on the sea. The *Naglfar* could be seen some distance away.
To be honest, it was quite cold since there was no air barrier deployed on the deck. Since I had come outside without any winter clothing, this air temperature was quite unbearable.
"Hoo—Is that so? Nevertheless, this was different from banishing the darkness. I am afraid what Mononobe Mitsuki accomplished was invoke her authority against the people who were dissolved by the darkness and merely bestowed their former forms to them. Thereafter, she sealed the vast amount of end matter into herself. This was essentially identical to the method thou hast used to save her in the past."
"Even if that's the case, the difference in scale is completely different from when I used the authority. Mitsuki must have truly mastered Neun's authority. Vritra, wouldn't it be better if you think of Mitsuki as your comrade instead of me? Wait—Did you call me to the deck just to tell me this?"
Poking fun at myself slightly, I replied. For Mitsuki to rescue me when I should be the one protecting her, I was truly useless. Mitsuki was the one who should be addressed as Neun.
"On the contrary. This is not what I wanted to discuss."
Against my expectations, Vritra shook her head. Dressed in the school uniform, her skirt was clearly very short and her arms were exposed, yet she looked completely unperturbed by the cold.
"Then why did you call me out? We're having a strategy meeting immediately after NIFL finishes gathering intelligence and Major Loki gets ready. There's no time to talk in leisure."

Due to the dramatic change in the situation, our next course of action could not be decided immediately. Right now, all we could do was wait.
Incidentally, all the unmanned ships and drones behind us that were providing support fire had been destroyed by Bahamut's all-out attack.
"Dost thou truly not comprehend? I believe this is fate."
"Fate? What do you mean?"
"Thou asked me to switch comrades, but I disagree. Currently, thou art undoubtedly the axis around which all else revolveth. Many phenomena, originally thought to be coincidental, have gathered here. Sure enough, thou art Gaia's chosen one. The being to destroy the ninth dragon."
Vritra asserted with conviction. I doubted.
"But it's clearly Mitsuki who's able to bring forth Neun's power, you know?"
"Indeed. After observing this battle, a method to vanquish this darkness hath occurred to me. Thy existence is essential."
Vritra nodded. What she said next was even harder to believe.
"Method to vanquish the darkness?"
"In fact, thou ought to know already, but thou art simply unwilling to accept it. Such are the ways of mankind, I understand well after living among ye. Hence, I must be the one to spell it out. Perhaps thou wilt hate me."
Seemingly with some kind of regret—looking at me with pained eyes—Vritra revealed the method to destroy the ninth calamity.
"'Tis a very simple method. Let Mononobe Mitsuki absorb all of the darkness, then kill her along with it using Code Lost. Given a human vessel, the authority is able to work its effect. This hath already been proven."
"—!?"
After my mind went blank, the night of the fireworks flashed through my thoughts. Flowing out from within Mitsuki, the darkness had transformed into human figures... They took on the appearances of Mitsuki's parents and attacked. Using Fafnir's power, I killed them.
My heart pounded rapidly. More than surprise, it was wrath that surged within me. My body shuddered.
"Screw you!"
I grabbed Vritra by the collar, lifting her petite body into the air. However, she did not even frown despite what ought to be a painful position.
"I could not be more serious."
Seeing the immense determination conveyed in her expression, I gritted my teeth.
I did not want to know this method. My mind even refused to consider this method. Just as Vritra pointed out, I should have realized this method long ago.

'—Such awful people we have here.'

At that moment, I heard a tiny voice behind me, so I turned around immediately.

However, there was no one there, except for a black shadow stretched out along the sunlight's direction, standing there silently the whole time.

Part 2

'—Hey hey, did you hear that? Mitsuki, can you believe she and your brother said something so awful? At this rate, don't you see, they're going to sacrifice you, Mitsuki? Are you really fine with this?'
Sitting on a chair, I—Mononobe Mitsuki—listened to the displeasing words coming from the shadow and sighed.
"Please be quiet. You will wake up Shion-san."
Was she exhausted from releasing antimatter at full power? Shion-san was curled up asleep on the bed.
The two of us were alone in the cramped cabin. The annoying shadow nagging at me did not count as human.
"Be quiet...? Now is not the time for that! I really heard it! I'm not lying! I can hear clearly hear every sound that reaches darkness—reaches shadows."
This voice and tone was truly identical to Miyako's. It apparently recovered its vitality because I had taken in new darkness.
"How ridiculous..."
To think that it was capable of imitating Miyako so perfectly even in such a situation, I was truly astonished by the ninth dragon's attention to detail.
"Please, believe me, Mitsuki!"
"I believe your words alright. Seal the ninth dragon within me then use Code Lost to kill me—This is a logical-sounding solution that is simple and easy to understanding. There is no need for you to lie regarding this either."
"Then—"
Ripples appeared on the shadow's surface and Miyako's face appeared faintly. However, I shrugged after giving her a glance.
"You completely missed the point. You completely... failed to understand Nii-san."
I spoke with pity and stood up from the chair. Did the fake Miyako fail to understand me? She fell silent, confounded.
Seeing her like that, I mocked her.
"However... Thank you for the information. As a result, I understand now. *I know how to fully realize my wish*."
After covering the sleeping Shion-san with a blanket on the bed, I walked to the cabin's entrance.
I had made my decision. I knew what I should do. All that was left was to take action for real.

"Kyah!?"
However, the instant I stepped into the corridor, I ran into Iris-san by accident. Iris-san seemed to crash into me before stumbling two or three steps back. Then she stared at me in surprise. She must have come to visit Shion-san and me.
"Mitsuki-chan, where are you going all by yourself?"
"—I need to find Nii-san. Although I know that I should not be alone, Shion-san fell asleep..."
After I apologized straight away, Iris showed a look of understanding and held my hand.
"Oh, I see! Then I'll come along too!"
"No, well, I think I shall go later—"
I was gong to find an excuse to return to the cabin for the time being, but I changed my mind mid-sentence.
—Indeed, this was a good opportunity. Let me make things simple and easy to understand.
"So, I think Mononobe went up to the deck with Vritra-chan. It looked like they had something important to talk about..."
"As always, Iris-san, you never listen to others. Please go away."
I shook off Iris-san's hand that was holding my hand and responded with a cold voice and gaze.
"Eh..."
She looked at me with exceptional shock. One could hardly blame her. This should be her first time seeing me act this way. This was also the first time for me to expose my true and ugly heart.
"Iris-san, I am very jealous of you."
I hesitated at first about what to say. What came out from my lips were such words.
"W-What are you suddenly saying?"
Iris-san showed obvious puzzlement, but I continued unfazed.
"You are cheerful, honest, and very kind-hearted, caring for others from the bottom of your heart... Iris-san, that is the kind of attractive and cute girl you are. It is only natural that Nii-san fell in love with you."
"No way—C-Compared to someone like me, Mitsuki-chan, you're prettier, more competent, and admired by everyone... Even Mononobe thinks of you as..."
"It is true that Nii-san does cherish me. He told me he loves me. However, that only applies to Nii-san as he is right now."
"Mononobe, right now?"
"Indeed, Nii-san is protecting me due to Neun's instinct. In the beginning, I was shocked by this revelation. All of Nii-san's feelings for me are fake."
"But that's—"
Iris-san wanted to object but I nodded and said:

"Yes, Iris-san, just as you said before, love and affection are feelings born from human instinct. Hence, I no longer consider Neun's instinct to be fake. However, please consider *the future* after that."
After initiating the conversation, my words naturally flowed forth. I could no longer stop. I could not allow myself to stop.
"I believe Nii-san will be victorious. No matter what hardship he must endure, Nii-san will destroy the ninth dragon, to save me, I suppose."
"Yes, Mononobe won't lose for sure!"
Iris-san clenched her fist tightly and agreed. However, this very kind-hearted but very dense girl still had not realized what was it that I truly feared.
"Indeed—Nii-san will surely succeed. But when that happens, what would I be to Nii-san, despite being by his side?"
"Eh..."
I told the correct answer to Iris-san who was showing a confused look.
"Everything will proceed smoothly and we will surely accomplish the ideal outcome. In other words, when the time comes, the ninth dragon that only exists within me will be destroyed. At that time, Nii-san *will lose the reason to protect me*."
"——"
Iris-san gasped. I smiled in self-deprecation at her.
"Did you know? Instincts can vanish. Love and affection can fade away. Nii-san's feelings for me will crumble and scatter. Of course, that does not imply that Nii-san will hate me, but things will definitely be different from before. At least... I could never win against you, Iris-san."
"W-Wait! N-No way—"
Iris-san looked like she wanted to deny all of what I said, but failed to find words.
This was only natural. I had been seeking salvation the whole time, yet no matter how much I contemplated, I still had not found the answer.
"I too, had attempted to convince myself that there was nothing I could do. However, that was no good, ultimately. Compared to the time when I wanted to yield Nii-san to you, Iris-san, and give up on Nii-san, things are different. That is because I now know that Nii-san loves me. Consequently, I... I cannot give up on the 'Nii-san who regards me as the one dearest to him'!"
Pouring the flood of my feelings into my words, I cried out, directing my dark gaze at Iris-san.
"Mitsuki-chan..."
"Iris-san, are you able to imagine Nii-san no longer loving you? To me—It is unthinkable. For me to see Nii-san change his feelings for me would be a fate worse than death."
I whispered helplessly while summoning in my hand my fictional armament of a bow, Brionac.
"Eh..."

Raising Brionac, I prepared an arrow of dark matter, aiming it at the frozen Iris-san who was standing before me at point-blank range.
"Now that I have said this much, do you understand? The future that Nii-san, you, and the others are aiming for, is not the future I wish to see. In other words, I am—everyone's enemy."
Along with my parting words, I shot the arrow at my "enemy"—

Part 3

—BOOM!!
The ship shook violently with the sound of an explosion.
"—"
Vritra and I were glaring at each on the deck. I tried hard to steady my footing while checking out my surroundings.
"Hey, what hath happened?"
Clinging tightly to me, Vritra asked urgently.
"Hold on, I'm checking the situation inside the ship…"
I focused my mind and started to investigate the abnormal situation inside Marduk. However, before that—Another explosion happened at the starboard.
The deck was blown away from inside. Holding her bow fictional armament, Mitsuki flew out.
Standing on one of the massive special artillery turrets, Mitsuki looked down at the two of us who were on the deck.
"Mitsuki…?"
While I called out my sister's name in surprise, I heard Jeanne's anxious voice in my mind.
'Captain, there has been explosions all over the ship—We have fires on our hands! The drive system is seriously damaged—'
However, I did not get to hear this report in full.
Looking at me, the expression on Mitsuki's face was too transparent. An unidentified sense of unease began to spread in my heart.
"My apologies, Nii-san. It would be a problem if you chased after me, so I had to cause all kinds of damage first."
"Da… mage…?"
"I shall take care of the two remaining unknown territories. Aid from you or the others will not be needed, Nii-san. Please wait here quietly together with everyone."
Although I was rendered speechless for a moment, I immediately regained my senses after hearing these words.
"Wait—Mitsuki, are you planning to do something alone?"
"…Not alone. I have help."
Mitsuki shook her head and gestured to her feet.
Due to the setting sun's rays, her pitch-black shadow extended all the way to the deck beneath the turret.

However... A substance darker than a silhouette expanded from the shadow there, stretching upwards to form a human figure. It was terrifying.
"This is..."
I recalled the time when shadows of Mitsuki's parents had appeared, but this outline was clearly different from theirs. This human figure even gave an impression of mass. A girl had materialized from it.
Like Mitsuki, she was wearing Midgard's uniform. Her skin was slightly dark, as though symbolizing her birth from darkness. And that face of hers —It bore a strong resemblance to Shinomiya-sensei and Shion.
"That's right, I am Mitsuki's companion, her dearest best friend."
The girl smiled and raised her hand. Next, a black sphere which looked like dark matter was generated on her hand, and turned into a naginata.
"Best friend... Don't tell me—"
I remembered her face. In the underground level of the Asgard laboratory, I had seen her soul. Because of that, she was not supposed to be here. This unbelievable scene made me doubt, but I still called out her name hoarsely.
"Shinomiya, Miyako...? No, it can't be. This is impossible. Mitsuki, don't be deceived! She's an impostor! Although I haven't told you, Mitsuki, the shadows also turned into Uncle and Auntie—they took on the forms of Uncle Kazuki and Aunti Misaki."
I confessed about the shadows turning into Mitsuki's parents while pointing at the thing that had transformed into Shinomiya Miyako. However, Mitsuki smiled wryly and nodded.
"Yes, I know. She is not Miyako. However, we *currently* share a common goal, so I am merely making use of her. If the need should arise, I shall destroy her immediately."
Mitsuki raised her left hand, producing a flood of blue light. In response, the fake Shinomiya Miyako panicked and flew into the air.
"Hey, don't say something so scary! I am clearly trying to help you sincerely, Mitsuki..."
"Stop pretending. However, so be it for now. Let us depart—Miyako-*san*."
Mitsuki generated wind from her fictional armament and flew into the air.
"Wait!"
Since Marduk was sabotaged, I had no means of chasing her. Vritra beside me also had her dark matter sealed, preventing her from flying into the air.
"—Siegfried!"
I summoned my fictional armament and aimed into the air.
I was planning to fire antigravitational matter above Mitsuki so that the repulsive field would push Mitsuki down, back to the ship. If I could stall for a while, Lisa and the others would be able to rush to the scene.
Seeing my movements, Mitsuki spoke coldly.
"Iris-san is in my cabin. It would be best if you hurried to save her."
"Wha..."
My heart jumped violently, making me forget to breathe. With mournful eyes, Mitsuki looked down at me while I was hesitating over my next move.

"These are Nii-san's true feelings. Hence... *Leave everything to me*."
Leaving behind these words filled with intense determination, Mitsuki disappeared into the orange sky together with her companion.
Too late... to chase after them. Understanding this, I lowered my hand.
—Leave everything to me.
These were my parting words to Mitsuki three years ago. A promise with the intent to protect everything.
However... I was wrong.
Now that I was the one being left behind this time, I finally understood.
This sentence—was actually a one-sided farewell.

Afterword

Hello, this is Tsukasa.
Thank you, everybody, for buying Unlimited Fafnir XII Darkness Disaster.
The subtitle has a kind of RPG magic feel to it, but the unexpected plot also gives the same impression. By the way, perhaps the magic impression started long ago (sweat drops).
To me, thinking about stuff like subtitles, chapter titles, skill names, or incantations is all part of the creation process of writing a novel. Putting this in better-sounding terms, despite the difficulty, this task is very fun, so I put a lot of effort into it.
It's not uncommon for me to spend as much time on thinking up titles and skill names as it takes to write ten pages of novel text.
In my previous series, my debut work, I had to think up incantations whenever a new type of magic appeared, so it was several times harder than right now.
Still, in another sense, this volume was very difficult.
After all, the plot involved "fleet battles" (though strictly speaking, it was not a fleet). To me, this is totally uncharted territory.
Having Marduk as a battleship as part of the setting was something I had in mind since the very beginning, but I never thought I'd actually get to write this scene for real.
During Volumes 2 and 3, the editor totally thought it was a joke when I told him, "To be honest, Marduk is a space battleship" (he probably doesn't remember it anymore).
In other words, there you have it, I have written this series to the point where I could not have imagined in the beginning.
Since it had been treated as a joke, I was actually quite afraid when submitting the outline for this volume. But fortunately, I got the OK and was able to write what I wished in its full form, Marduk vs giant dragon.
Next volume will also contain a scene that I've always wanted to write.
Writing what you want to write, the possibility of writing what you want to write—Now that's true happiness.
In order not to waste the chances given to me by the support from all you dear readers, I will definitely spare no effort and keep going, giving it my very best.
Next volume will greatly advance the plot, so I hope everyone can continue to follow this series.

Well then, next comes the acknowledgements.
Korie Riko-sensei, thank you again for drawing such lovely illustrations. Mitsuki's expression on the cover is very touching. I'm also very happy that Atla is so adorable. Whenever I see Korie-sensei's illustrations, it feels like the characters in my mind have come to life. I owe it to Korie-sensei that I can keep writing the *Fafnir* series with such joy. I continue to look forward to working together.
Editor in charge, Shouji-sama, I am very grateful to you for giving useful suggestions and contacting me so swiftly. Because your workload is three times—no, exceeding that—more than other people's, I am very worried about when you actually sleep. Please take care of yourself. It would be my utmost honor if we are able to keep creating *Fafnir* together.
Finally, let me express my sincere thanks to all of my dear readers.
Okay, see you next time.
Tsukasa, July 2016

Illustrator's Afterword

あとがき

ファフニール12巻!!

いよいよ
クライマックス
ですねぇ。

12巻はイリス
ちゃんに脱が
されてる深月
ちゃんが
お気に入りです。

Fafnir Volume 12!
The climax is here at last.
I really liked Mitsuki-chan getting stripped by Iris-chan in Volume 12.
Korie Riko